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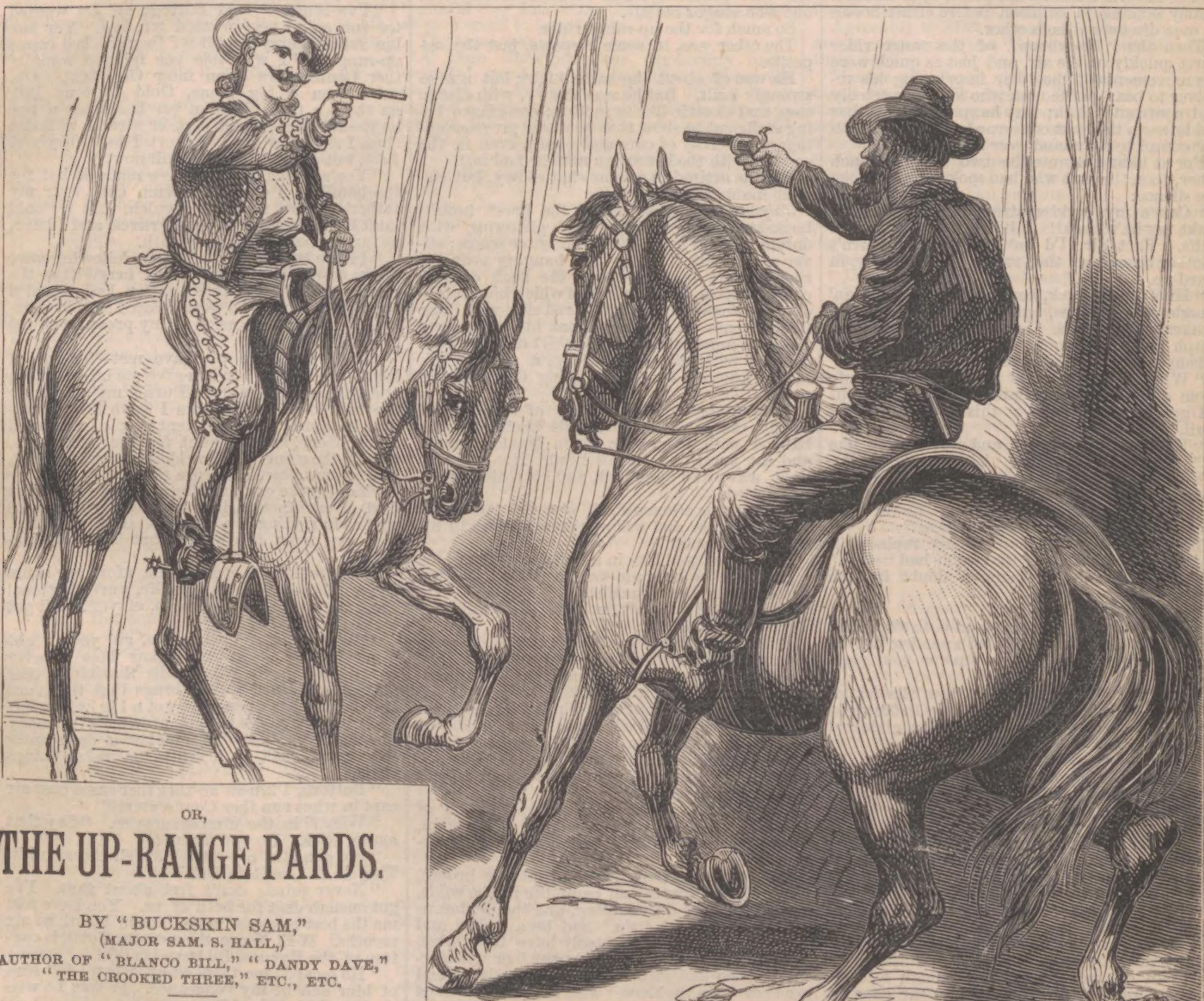
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OR, THE UP-RANGE PARDS.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM,"
(MAJOR SAM. S. HALL.)

AUTHOR OF "BLANCO BILL," "DANDY DAVE,"
"THE CROOKED THREE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

STRANGERS AND PILGRIMS.

"KA-WHOOP!"

This ejaculation burst in the utmost astonishment from the lips of a horseman, who, at the same instant, jerked, cocked and leveled his revolver over the ears of his horse, that was prancing and snorting with fright. His aim was directly at the head of another rider, who had dashed around a spur of rock, afar up the side of the range known as the Soledad Mountains.

These are situated in the middle of the southern portion of New Mexico, and extend a short distance over the line, running due north and south, the most southern point being quite near the east bank of the Rio Grande, and some twenty miles south of Fort Fillmore, on the same river.

GOLD BUTTONS

"KA-WHOOP TO YOURSELF, AND SEE HOW YOU LIKE IT!" RETURNED THE OTHER, LAUGHING HEARTILY.

The two horsemen were traveling, one up and the other down the range, upon a winding rocky shelf, which was narrow, and at this particular point covered with a thin layer of earth, that had been blown there by the furious winds and become moss-grown, thus forming a soft carpet, which had prevented each from hearing the approach of the other.

Neither of them had expected or even had the remotest idea of meeting a fellow-being or even a brute in that wild and barren waste.

The point at which they met was on a portion of the range seldom frequented by man.

Afar above their heads the serrated peaks towered skyward, while westward the glow of sunset yet tinged the sky a rosy red for some distance above the horizon line. But the mountain range was in gloom, most depressing to look upon.

Dark fissures, seams and yawning breaks in the dizzy steeps; hanging boulders, with here and there stunted cedars, pines and cacti; this was the mountain-side view; while below, at the base of the range, was a wide fringe of foothills, partially wooded, the open plain stretching beyond toward the west, a broad, clear vista.

Some thirty miles due west was San Diego—a town on the east bank of the Rio Grande—while beyond, and about fifteen miles up the river, were Fort Thorne, Mesilla, Bracito and Fort Fillmore—the last mentioned being near the boundary-line between Old and New Mexico.

Hastening in opposite directions, the riders had both turned an abrupt point, their animals nearly coming in collision before either horses or men discovered each other.

Then the "Ka-whoop!" of the range rider burst quickly on the air, and just as quick were the movements of the other in bringing his revolver to bear on the man who so unexpectedly had confronted him; but he spoke not, neither did he seem the least concerned or startled, holding complete command over his emotions.

For at least a minute the two gazed at each other, then the first who had spoken again broke the silence:

"Carve my carkiss, stranger, ef yer didn't make my ha'r crawl! I didn't hear yer critter's huffs. Fact air, I'd ha' swored thar warn't another human on ther range 'ceptin' below, in Hard-up."

"Hit's nip an' tuck, bead an' bead, muzzle an' muzzle with we'-uns, but yer doesn't 'pear ter hanker fer my bleed. I reckon, from yer photygraph phiz, ye're squar' an' white, which same this hyer pilgrim claims ter be."

"Whar in ther name o' natur' did yer skute from outen ther rocks, hoss an' all? I thought I'd gut ter ther eend o' this hyer dog-gon'd trail."

"Ka-whoop to yourself, and see how you like it!" returned the other, laughing heartily. "You'd have got to the end of your life trail before this moment, if I hadn't set you down in my mental memorandum as O. K. Lower your shooter, and mine goes into scabbard!"

The weapons of each were at once replaced in their belts, thus proving that each had "sized" the other, deciding without a doubt in both cases.

The last speaker continued:

"That was a quick draw on both sides, and we'll call it a 'draw game,' both passing out on the pick-trigger biz. But, to answer your question:

"I'm just fluttering down from the frigid. It's too cool for comfort up the peaks in the night time. Now, where did you scoot, skip, glide and scramble from?"

"What—me? Why, dang my dog-gone dispersish, ef I ain't dartin' up outen ther dust! Hit's too dry down b'low, an' hot, so I thought I'd flirt up outen ther fluster. Dry! Waal, stranger, I don't reckon thar word air deep enough, 'specially ter suit a pilgrim o' my dispersish, what's bin gouged out o' his duckits 'mong ther kyard-flippers an' whisk-slingers o' Hard-up."

"Thar's dang ole-timers er tenderhuffs what lunges inter ther lively burg down thar what doesn't pesky soon lunge out ag'in, ef 'lowed ter levan't, not only *hard up*, but jist skulped slick an' clean out, not hevin' dust enough left ter make a hummin' bird wink ef hit war chucked inter his peeper."

"I'm jist gaspin' fer a 'errigate' right now, stranger. Doesn't yer hear me wheeze? Don't reckon hit's much use axin' yer, es yer bees from ther tip-top peaks, ef thar's any bug-juice 'bout yer outfit?"

"Well, my gentle pilgrim, it would appear, as you infer from the direction I have come, that you might bet on a probable sure thing that I hadn't a single solitary drop of liquid lightning. However, we'll investigate instanter, for I observe that you are weak and weary."

"As I have fluttered down from the frigid, and you darted up from the dust, meeting here, we'll call this the half-way house. Suppose, then, we proceed to rest, and relieve our beasts, besides recuperating with red-eye, if we are fortunate in making a find of a flask, somewhere."

"Wa-al, dang my dyspeptic dispersish, ef yer doesn't jist make me b'ile over wi' delight! I'm

deuced nigh dead, stranger, without a word o' discount."

The strangely met travelers then dismounted, and, grasping hands, had a warm and hearty "shake." They seemed satisfied and pleased at having met each other, each appearing confident that the other was worthy of regard and friendship.

The rough-spoken individual was a man of herculean build, full six feet in height, quick of motion, and supple as a panther.

He was deeply sun-burned, his face honest in expression, and his eyes keen as those of an eagle, although bloodshot and showing signs of recent dissipation.

He was clothed in miners' rough boots, woolen breeches and shirt of the same, blue in color, and with a wide flowing collar, open at the throat. His belt and scabbards were of rough leather, and his pistols and bowie were plain; there being no ornaments about his arms, equipment, or himself.

He bestrode a strong-limbed steed, a half-breed, marked for speed and endurance, and with an intelligent eye.

It was not strange that the man who had met him had trusted implicitly in his honesty, although at that time and place there were but few who could be thus trusted, for he was a perfect personification of good will and trust, of honor and truth, as he grasped the hand held out to him.

The expression of his face, however, upon first being startled, had been suspicious and vengeful, as though he had a suspicion that the person who confronted him so unexpectedly was one who sought his life.

So much for the up-range rider.

The other was, in some respects, just the opposite.

He was of about the same height, but not so strongly built. But he was sinewy, with elastic step, and electric-like in motion; one glance being sufficient to show that he would prove an antagonist worthy of care and guard, even in the conflict with the herculean man he had met.

He was attired in a somewhat showy, but elegant manner.

Jaqueta and breeches of the finest tanned buckskin, fringed deeply and glittering with dozens of gold buttons on the outer seams; silver spurs, with tinkling bells hanging near the rowels, were buckled about the heels of neat calfskin boots, into the legs of which his breeches were tucked. A sash of red silk, with long fringed ends was bound about his waist, and the open *jaqueta* displayed a shirt of rich cloth, covered with silk embroidery; a gay-colored, loosely-knotted kerchief holding the collar in place.

A broad-brimmed sombrero of soft felt, of nearly the same shade as his buckskin, was banded with filigree work in Mexican style, and sat jauntily upon his head. His hair was light, wavy and abundant, and his features finely chiseled.

Straight as a lance-shaft was this Adonis of the mountains, and willowy and graceful in his every movement.

His attire fitted him in a faultless manner.

The horse he bestrode was in perfect keeping with rider and equipments.

The animal was a "buckskin"—so called in Texas, from its color.

It had long graceful limbs, and body well-proportioned, with slender sharp-pointed ears, lengthy muzzle, and large nostrils; giving evidence in build of great fleetness.

The reader will doubtless admit that the horse and rider, as described, made up a handsome and remarkable picture, which might well attract admiration, and would probably create envy, if not contempt, among the rough miners of the mountains.

There was not, however, the slightest show of this kind manifested by the burly borderman, whom this seeming dude had met on the mountain-side.

Had it not been for the unmistakable bronze, born of long travel and camp life in the wilds, the manner of dismounting, and the dexterous way in which his "six" had been jerked and leveled, he would undoubtedly have been taken at first sight for a dandy "fresh," or "tenderfoot," who had struck it rich somewhere, and was now "on the show" with his gold-bedecked costume.

CHAPTER II.

THE CAPTAIN OF THE HYENAS.

The confidence each of these strangely-met men manifested in the other would have led an observer to suspect that they both either knew, or suspected they knew each other.

The gayly attired one of the two lost no time in searching his saddle-bags, and quickly produced a costly flask, with a false bottom of silver which served as a cup. This he detached, and passed both to the miner, saying:

"There, pard, is something that will cause you to forget the dust you have left behind you. Drink hearty to the health of Gold Buttons Bill!"

Eagerly, and with longing look and intense satisfaction, the big borderman took a long pull at the flask. Rubbing his sleeve across

his lips, and leaving a profound sigh of relief, he said:

"Thanks, pard, and a heap on 'em! That stuff'll fix me, straight as a pin. I war consider'ble shaky, for a fact. Tho's a heap sight better liquid nor we ever poured down in Bowlderburg."

As the emphasized personal pronoun was spoken the young man addressed had just raised the flask to his own lips; but it was lowered quickly, and with a start, as the last word was uttered. He gave a suspicious and searching glance at the burly stranger, upon whose lips a smile was playing.

For some seconds the two gazed into each other's eyes. Then their hands were thrust forward simultaneously, meeting in a hearty grasp, while the younger exclaimed:

"By heavens! I knew I had seen you before, pard. You've grown a beard since we parted, which somewhat changes your appearance. Nugget Nick, old boy, it just does my heart and soul good to meet you!"

"I'd rather have run against you especially here, and at this particular time, than any pilgrim on the range from here to Canada. Did you recognize me at first?"

"Reckon yer fergits yerself, Buttons, ole pard. Ye're younger'n me, and young folkses change a heap in a few months. Yer ha'r warn't long when yer struck Bowlderburg, comin' from Denver, huntin' yer dad what had bin robbed an' shot ter pieces by ther Confiscators, es ther cussed road-agents called themselves. 'Sides that, yer didn't slicker 'roun' in buckskin, Mex' style."

"I've hearn o' Gold Buttons, an' jist wanted ter run ag'in yer—wanted ter, bad. Yer hev bin raisin' merry Tophit wi' ther crooked cusses up-range, an' I war tole yer foller'd some o' ther Confiscators clean inter Ole Mex'. Oh, ye've won a big name, Gold Buttons Bill, an' that's a fact. Reckon yer hes made a few on the Hyenas scratch dirt, er stretch a lariat since I see'd yer last. I thort I know'd yer ef fu'st, but c'u'n't place yer till now."

"You're right, Nick; I have made it hot for the bandits. I swore a solemn oath, over my father's corpse in the big gulch, that I would hunt his murderers to their graves, and I have, as far as possible, kept my oath."

"I have been in Mexic lately, following some of the cowardly assassins, but I heard that the remnant of the old organization had joined a band of outlaws who were located in this vicinity. This is the occasion of my presence on the Soledad Mountains."

"It is fortunate we have met—for me, at least—for I know you can give me information, and will work with me. During my search for the broken-up Confiscators I have been fortunate in saving many innocent people from death and robbery, and the hunt for the miscreants, so long the scourge of Bowlderburg and vicinity, has become a second nature to me."

"I enjoy the exciting life, and there is a great deal of satisfaction in avenging my father, as well as in ridding the earth of these wretches. You are from Hard-up? That is my destination."

"But we'll hev a council-talk afore we skute down thar-a-way, bet yer life, pard Buttons! Dang my dyspeptic dispersish, ef yer hain't got ter go slow in *that* burg!"

"Hard-up air a hard locate, an' ye're right 'bout them tag-slashers. Thar becs a hefty crowd on 'em, an' they calls themselves ther 'Hyeners o' Hard-up,' an' brags that they runs ther burg. Thar gang hev got a big cave somewhat on ther range nigh ther town, but nobuddy kin find hit. They jist makes a dash inter ther burg, onc't in a while, an' rakes things clean."

"Buttons, I kin sw'ar thar same cuss air cap't in what run ther Confiscators!"

"What?" in the utmost surprise. "Say that again, Nick. Do you mean it?"

"I'm gamblin' my critter an' shooters on hit. They're all I hes left, Bill."

"Never mind; don't fret about that. I've got enough dust for both of us. You have told me the best piece of news I have heard in six months. If El Negro, the swarthy devil, is captain of the Hyenas, I'll have his life!"

"He escaped me three times, when I felt sure of him and of my vengeance. It was he who shot my father dead!"

Gold Button Bill's face and manner had undergone a great change. His countenance no longer beamed with smiles and happy satisfaction at having met Nugget Nick, but was almost frightful in its look of fury. His teeth were set, and his brow was corrugated with scowls.

Nick viewed his young pard with surprise, and began almost to regret having informed him that El Negro was in the vicinity. He remained silent, gazing open-mouthed at Bill for a few moments, when the latter again spoke:

"You know, of course, that El Negro is an American. His real name is Nathaniel Night, and he married a Mexican woman. He had a daughter, a veritable she-devil! She must be now seventeen years old, or more, if alive."

"Do you know if she is in the band with her father? The wife was shot by her dastard hus-

band, but I do not believe the daughter knew of her father's awful crime."

The two men had seated themselves side by side on a rock, still holding the bridle-reins of their horses.

"Ther gal air with ther band—so I heerd in Hard-up—an' she's a speedy shooter. She doesn't know what fear bees, an' a chip o' ther ole block clean through."

"I wish she was not with them."

"Why, pard Bill? She needs killin' es bad es her dad. She's laid out more'n one good square pilgrim cold fer keeps."

"I'd rather some one else would take it upon himself to capture her. I don't war on women, Nick. Do you think there is any one down in Hard-up who knew me up the range?"

"I c'u'dn't say, pard Bill."

"Well, we'll find that out before morning. Let us propel ourselves to a more favorable point for a halt, where the nags can browse, and we can have a drink and lunch. I'd like to enter the town after things get lively, which will be some hours later."

"I repeat, Nick, I'm greatly rejoiced to have met you, old pard. You say they skinned you, and ran you out of the burg? How was that?"

"Hit war a gang o' card-slippers, an' I war plum lunyfied from pourin' down bug-juice. So they gut ther drop on me. Ef I'd bin sober thar'd bin fun, yeou bet!"

"There will be fun, pard. We'll get the drop on the hellions. Did you spot them?"

"Dog-goned ef I didn't, Bill. I've gut tha'r fortygraphs all in my brain-box."

"Good! We'll hustle them. We'll wake up the town, and let El Negro know we're on his trail for blood and revenge. By all the gods! I'll have his life for murdering my father!"

"Here we are! This is a good place for a halt, Nick."

"Hit air, dead sure an' sartain!"

The pair had passed down the shelf, leading their animals until a break in the rough wall revealed a cove-like space, that was grown with thickets of pine and cedar.

Into this they proceeded. Then, loosening the girths of their saddles, they removed the bridles from the animals, and secured the neck-ropes to bushes.

Then Gold Buttons Bill untied his saddle-bags from the cantle, and the two strangely and opportunely met pards seated themselves, and proceeded to break their fast with evident satisfaction.

Yet, there was a vengeful look stamped on Bill's face, though blended with a savage joy at having at last learned that he was near his father's murderer—near to the fulfillment of his oath of vengeance, sworn over that father's mutilated corpse!

"Yer can't jist 'zactly tell who mought drap in onter we'-uns, Bill; hyer, so nigh ter ther Hyener, who mought send a few blue whistlers s'archin' fer our bestest bleed. Thet would cure my dyspeptic dispersish dang suddint. I'm es billyus es though I hed feeded on owls an' coyotes b'iled in rattler ile, fer six moons!"

"Take another drink, Nick, an' eat hearty. You'll soon be O. K. Do you remember what El Negro's daughter called herself, or what name she goes by now?"

"Ya-as. Her name is Nina Noche, which air nigh ter her dad's. His air Negro, meanin' Black, in Greaser gab, an' hern air Noche, meanin' Night, which air her rale last name. They're black enough, both on 'em, ther Ole Harry knows."

"Very appropriate 'cogs,' they are indeed, pard Nick, and they'll live longer than the diabolical pair that bear them!"

"So they run Hard-up, do they? Then, I presume, some of the band are continually in the town, acting as spies?"

"Thet's es true es ary word a gospel-sharp ever slung, pard Gold Buttons. I'm dead sartain some on 'em war mixed up in wi' ther crowd what made me dart up outen ther dust, an' take ter ther peaks."

"Howsomdever, I'd ha' lit down on 'em ag'in, dead sartain, arter gittin' over my dang dyspeptic billyusness, brung'd on by ther p'ison terrantaler juice what they shovo at a pilgrim, et four bits fer three fingers."

It grew darker, and the roseate hue in the west gradually disappeared, as the pair partook of their lunch, washed down by moderate draughts from a canteen of water, dashed with whisky from Gold Buttons' flask.

Nugget Nick evidently felt like another man, or more like his own true self.

"Bill," he burst forth, after a short silence, "hit does me a heap o' good ter un ag'in' yer. I war humsick, an' ormighty discouraged. Reckon I mought hev had a menadery in my butes, an' rolled off'm ther peaks afore sun-up; not hevin' any whisk' fer ter taper off with."

"I war a fool—a dang'd or'nary fool!—ter glide up range without bein' well heeled, fur es red-eye is consarned. I hed swored a big swear, ter git even wi' ther hellions below, an' I'd ha' made a big break toward hit alone of yer hedn't turned up—er darted down, I should say."

"Es hit air, we kin work in double harness."

"Our pleasure at meeting is mutual, pard Nick, as I said before; and, let us hope, it has

been providential. You and I must declare war upon the hellions, as well as upon the Hyenas of Hard-up."

"Those who have wronged you must be punished. But many things are brought to my mind at this moment. From falling in with you, Nick, startling and agonizing scenes, and a bloody tragedy that nearly drove me to insanity, come up before me vividly. I knew not—"

Gold Buttons was here interrupted by Nick, who sprung forward, grasped his pard's arm, and gave a hiss of caution and warning.

At the same instant, the horses threw up their heads, and gave loud snorts of alarm, springing back toward the shelf as far as their ropes would allow; the eyes of the animals fixed upon the cove-like space in the mountain-side, and showing bright in the semi-darkness.

Gold Buttons listened, in great astonishment.

All became still in the spot our friends had chosen for their halting place.

Then Bill heard the sounds that had been noticed by the practiced ear of Nick, when he himself could detect nothing.

There was, now, distinctly heard a crashing of bushes, and the fierce growls of an animal, judged by the listeners to be a cinnamon bear.

Both sprung to their feet, and drawing their revolvers from their belts, ran toward the point from which the sounds proceeded. There was yet light sufficient for them to distinguish forms when not too far distant.

They were soon at the point of disturbance, when they beheld a sight that caused them to be thankful they had taken the alarm, and rushed at such speed to investigate.

The scene was a startling one.

A huge cinnamon bear, apparently badly wounded, stood upon its haunches, cutting the air with its fore-paws. Before it, his back against a rock, was an Indian youth, who held a spear, the point of which was buried in the breast of the savage beast.

Firm as the ledge against which he stood was the red boy, but the white pards knew he was doomed did they not act, and quickly at that; for the terrible claws, striking at the youth, but just missed him, while the lance entering deeper allowed the bear to press nearer and nearer his foe.

There was not a moment to lose.

Neither of the men spoke a word, but dashed up, and, placing their revolvers to the head of the huge beast, pressed triggers.

A terrific report followed, echoing afar up the peaks, and bear and Indian both fell to the earth; the savage brute dead; and the red youth in a swoon, evidently from loss of blood, although the darkness prevented our friends from seeing the wounds of either beast or boy.

CHAPTER III.

HEADING TOWARD HARD-UP.

GOLD BUTTONS and Nugget Nick lost no time in collecting some dry brush, and lighting a fire by which they could examine the wounds of the Indian youth, who had so strangely come under their care.

Neither of the two had any dislike for the youth, although they most cordially hated all red-men, and Apaches in particular, and they knew that the boy was of that bloodthirsty tribe. They had, on the contrary, been filled with admiration for him, as they felt positive he could have gotten away from the huge beast by climbing up the rough rocks.

They soon had a bright blazing fire, and at once placed the young Indian upon a blanket by the side of it.

They well knew they were endangering their own lives by starting this fire. Some of the outlaw band, the "Hyenas," might blaze into them with their rifles at any moment; yet they thought little of this.

"Dang my dyspeptic dispersish!" muttered Nugget Nick; "ef ther leetle red ain't tored up ormighty bad, an' hev lost a heap o' bleed!"

"He war chuck-full o' sand, he war, an' yer needn't fergit hit. Ef he's patched up, an' gits his full growth, he'll be a ripsnorter, an' nebbe so will f'ar off a heap o' ha'r yit from white folkses' brain-boxes. P'raps we'd better 'low him ter flip-flop over ther range; though hit would seem ruther rough, bein's he's sich a gritty leetle cuss."

"He's a brave youngster, Nick, and we are not making war on boys, especially when they're wounded. I'll get the canteen, and patch him up with some salve and plaster I have in my saddle-bags."

"All hunky, pard! Perceed. He's clawed an' chawed some considerable, but I reckon he'll scrouge through, an' nex' time git ther deadwood on a cinnamon afore he closes in fer keeps. Fotch ther canteen, an' I'll wash off ther bleed."

"He's putty 'spectable-lookin' fer a 'Pache, I sw'ar!"

Gold Buttons Bill had not waited to listen to the words of his pard, and soon appeared with the articles needed.

The wounds of the youth were bathed, and a portion of the contents of the liquor-flask was poured between his lips. His black eyes slowly opened, and deep sighs disturbed his breast.

While the two men were dressing his wounds,

the Apache gazed at them in evident astonishment. He seemed hardly able to believe the evidence of his senses.

Why did these whites, not finish the work begun by the bear?

Why were they striving to save his life?

The eyes of the savage youth almost spoke these thoughts. He fastened a long and eager gaze, first upon one face and then upon the other. Then his lids closed, and he appeared to be unconscious of his surroundings, although breathing naturally.

"There! He's all right now, as far as we can go; and the wounds will heal fast, for his flesh is hard and firm and he's young."

"That bear is a monster. I wonder how he came to tackle such a beast, and what brought the little red so near Hard-up, anyway? He must have seen us before he had the row with Bruin."

Thus spoke Gold Buttons Bill.

Nugget Nick put in a word in response.

"Ya-as, pard; that's all we'-uns kin do, an' I'm gamblin' es hefty es I kin that he'll be peart an' eager ter buck ag'in' live b'ar-meat in another week. Yer can't kill a 'Pache without splittin' thar bleed mercheens, er thar brain-boxes, an' even then they'll do a heap o' kickin' an' circuin' 'sides warblin' thar death-song afore they skute on ther long, dark trail."

"Le's break off some b'ar meat, now we hes a fire, an' hev a good chaw o' decent grub."

"All right Nick! Just hel me carry the tricks back to our saddles, and then get some salt and corn-pone, and we'll have a feast. The boy is asleep, I believe, and will wake up O. K."

Agreeably to Bill's request, Nick helped to rearrange matters, and they then returned to their patient.

The fire still blazed, lighting up for some distance the cove-like space. The white pards stood, side by side, gazing both in surprise and astonishment at the outspread blanket, upon which, a minute or two previous, they had left the Indian youth, apparently insensible to his own surroundings.

The Apache boy had vanished.

They looked around them on every side, and peered up the dark walls of rock, but not a living object met their view.

They stared at each other, in amazement.

"Darn'd ef that ain't billyus!"

"I say, Nick, this is astounding! Where could he have gone to? I did not believe he could gain his feet even. I thought him unconscious of our presence."

"Ther little red cuss must ha' bin playin' possum. Fact air, I'm dead sure on hit."

"But with what possible object?"

"Thar yer has me by the short ha'r. Dog'd ef I knows! He's levanted any how, an' we'-uns has done our jewty. Le's eat, an' then dust down ther range."

"Lively air ther word, fer our shooters spoke loud, an' ther fire shines bright. Ther helljuns mought git ther drop onter us."

"You're right, Nick. We'll dart out of the dew in a few fleeting periods. I reckon we'll have time enough to chew a little bear meat though, in the first place."

"Mebbe so, an' mebbe not so, pard. Hit's a ormighty, dangerous locate, an' that 'Pache boy warn't alone, I'll bet my butes!"

"He's too young ter be away from the village, lessen he's with a huntin'-party."

"That's very reasonable. We'll scot for the level, directly we're through eating."

"Jehu-whittaker! But that's a big bear!"

"Ye're mighty right!" agreed Nick, as he slashed the skin from a ham, and cut out four juicy steaks, which he cast upon the living coals. These were soon cooked sufficient for prairie and mountain roammers, who invariably prefer their meat rare; and the pair proceeded to enjoy their impromptu feast with a gusto that was seemingly as strong as though they had not, but a few minutes previous, broken a long fast.

In ten minutes more they were in their saddles, and making their way down along the dangerous narrow shelf of rock; Nick in the lead, and both relying upon their horses to find some footing more than upon their own sense of sight.

They had gone but a few yards from their starting point, however, both of them scanning the mountain-side in front, below, and above them, when twin spurts of fire were seen, followed by a loud report of two rifles, that "spoke" simultaneously. Then, with a spiteful, spattering sound, two bullets struck the shelf, one close beside each of them.

An oath burst from Nugget Nick's lips, in amazement and anger.

"Thet war a close call fer us, pard. Hit's thet cussed 'Pache boy's outfit, I'll bet my butes! Le's glide lively, er we'll git bored."

"I tell you, Nick, those were white men! I got a glimpse of the face of one of them by the flash of his rifle. We've no show here to strike back."

"Hark! There's another shot!"

Sure enough, the report of a single rifle sounded; and then shot out a frightful half-yell and half-shriek of blended agony and terror, while, down the steep precipice near our friends, a

dark object came whirling, end over end, striking here and there, and bounding away from the rock wall.

The two men drew rein, and gazed spellbound, in horror.

They knew that object was a human being.

On it dashed, disappearing in the darkness far below.

Gold Buttons and Nick shuddered.

"Ef thet 'Pache youngster air able to hold up a gun, hit war him what plugged thet crook-ed critter, fer ter pay us fer savin' him from the Mar. Hit war two o' the Hyeners, what plugged us et us, pard Bill, an' thet one'll never slash another o' Uncle Samwill's letter bags."

"I don't think it was the Indian youth," said Bill. "The boy was not equal to it, I'm certain. Besides, he had no gun."

"Mebbe not. But skute air ther word. Hit's gittin' onhealthy fer pilgrims like we-'uns."

"Git lively! even ef we break our necks, which I'd ruther do nor git bored by a Hyener."

With a light laugh, but a somewhat nervous one, Bill spurred his horse on, down the shelf; but his companion kept well in advance.

In the short space of half an hour they reached a point almost at the base of the range, and in plain sight of the mining-town known as Hard-up.

Lights were to be seen in the town, and both the men drew rein for a minute, listening intently.

But there were no sounds that would indicate that the reports of rifles up the side of the range had been heard by those in the burg, and the pair proceeded to the base of the range and then between the foot-hills toward Hard-up.

There they were destined to meet with most startling adventures and dangers, that were undreamed of by them.

They were, indeed, entering what was, metaphorically, a den of human lions, tigers and hyenas.

Soon they halted, for the purpose of changing the appearance of each; the moon rising, a huge sphere of seeming molten silver, as if to favor them.

In a little time, the appearance of Nick, especially, was altered greatly, and again they urged their animals toward Hard-up.

CHAPTER IV.

BLACK EAGLE.

GOLD BUTTONS and Nugget Nick had met on the mountain shelf at a time and place when neither of them dreamed that a human being was nearer than the foot-hills.

Both had been, as we have seen, greatly astonished.

Their meeting, as it seemed to them before two hours had passed, was providential, for they had saved the young Indian's life. Neither of them had thought it possible that there had been a witness to their meeting.

Yet such was the case.

It was the Apache boy.

And little did the red youth imagine he would in such a short time owe his life to the two whites, whom he hated with all the bitter, murderous hatred of his savage nature, having been taught so to do from his very earliest comprehension.

He was skulking among the rocks, and had been watching and following Gold Buttons, eager to secure his scalp. He had, young as he was, passed through the starvation and deprivation of wa'er ordeal, which every Apache must suffer before he goes on his first war-path, to prove his fortitude. And he had done more.

He had sat in the circle of young braves, while the warriors, on their mustangs, had galloped around the circle, wielding their torturing quirts of buffalo-skin with great strength and velocity, and cutting the backs of their younger brothers.

He had undergone this torture without a change of countenance; standing firm, with a look of scorn and contempt upon his face, when he detected a swaying and trembling in some of his comrades. Boy though he was, he would have hurled himself from some awful height of the Apache Mountains, had he failed to pass through the tortures necessary to prove himself worthy to go on his first lone war-path.

He had sworn by the spirits of his fathers, that he would wear the scalp of a hated pale-face at his belt before the moon grew small; and then, an eagle-feather would decorate his beaded fillet. He, and that portion of his tribe over which his father was war-chief, scorned and detested such of the Apaches as had signed treaties with the great chief of the whites at Washington, and had gone to a reservation, there to be guarded and watched by the hated "Long-Knives."

They lived in a beautiful valley in their wild mountains, where the detested pale-faces had never trod; and where, if they came, their bones should be gnawed by coyotes. And the boy was on his own war-trail, which he vowed should end in the gaining of an eagle-feather, to be placed by his father in his fillet, in the presence of the whole portion of the tribe over whom that savage sire ruled.

Then would his heart swell with pride, and

the maidens of the village look upon him as a true warrior, although so young.

And far, far had he galloped on his wild-eyed mustang, toward the northwest, from the mountains of Apacheria in Texas.

He had, from the foot-hills, spied a horseman, afar up the adamantine range; for his eyes were keen as an eagle's. And many an eagle had the red youth slain with his bow and arrow, having been so fortunate as to bring down from his position on a towering peak one of those birds that was as black as night, such as none in his tribe had ever killed.

This had given him the name of Black Eagle.

The feathers of this ebon bird, the chief had caused the "medicine man" of the village to preserve, that they might be used to place in the fillets of such of the young braves as should earn this proud insignia. And one of these, Black Eagle resolved to have, when he returned to his tribe, and his father—the renowned chief, White Buffalo.

Consequently, when he discovered the lone rider up the range, he, knowing after a moment's inspection that the man was white, resolved to have his scalp.

Securing his mustang, therefore, in such a manner that the animal could graze, and yet be secure from discovery, he clutched the rifle his father had given him when starting, and bounded up the rocky steep, ever keeping himself concealed from the view of his intended victim.

As Black Eagle ascended, Gold Buttons Bill descended, the two drawing near each other, and the first named proceeding after the manner of a panther when stealthily crawling upon its prey.

The young Apache also, at frequent times, as he knew a warrior should, gave sweeping glances down the steep and over the plain beyond the foot-hills, lest an enemy might discover him, and crawl upon him, as he was endeavoring to do upon the lone horseman.

But the shelf upon which the latter was riding could not be distinguished by Black Eagle, and an abrupt turn of Bill lost to the Indian boy all chance of gaining a shot at his intended victim.

Yet Black Eagle was not discouraged.

Indeed, he knew not the meaning of this word, there being none such in his vocabulary. Being then in the rear of Gold Buttons Bill, he climbed rapidly across, and then along the mountain-side, striving to get ahead of the equestrian, but being forced to select his route, keeping shielded from view.

This made his attempt impossible.

He then perceived another white man meet the one he had hoped to shoot, and he was greatly rejoiced to see each level a pistol at the head of the other. He now beheld two scalps in the prospective.

Most certainly, he thought, one would be killed, and then he would shoot the survivor, thus gaining both scalps, with the horses, equipments and arms, so valuable to the Apaches.

This would be a deed worth doing.

Great would be the honors showered upon him when he returned with this plunder and the trophies of war.

His father would indeed be proud of him.

But these glowing pictures, these bright hopes of Black Eagle were banished when the white pards replaced their weapons, and then dismounted, grasping hands in friendship.

"Ugh!" burst from the youthful savage, in disappointed rage.

Yet still he was far from relinquishing his purpose.

He hoped to have an opportunity yet to secure a scalp.

He took advantage of the halt, and the conversation of the two whites, and made his way along below their position, reasoning that they would probably go down the shelf toward the town at the foot of the range, the trails to which he had discovered while in the foot-hills.

As the shades of night were fast falling, Black Eagle felt positive that the two whites would halt, and not descend that dangerous slope in the darkness.

If so, then would be his chance.

He would crawl into their camp when they slept and slay them with his knife, thus making no noise.

Agreeably to his surmises the pair did proceed down the shelf, and soon halted a little to the right of the same. He could now crawl upon his enemies with safety, unseen by them. But he was obliged to make a wide *detour* over a very difficult way, and one that consumed much time.

Soon, however, he beheld the dim forms of the men he sought seated near each other.

That they were aware they were in a dangerous section of the country he knew, for they had dispensed with a fire, evidently for prudential reasons.

Black Eagle could also perceive the horses, and he already fancied himself upon the back of one and leading the other loaded with plunder, with two scalps in his belt, back toward the Rio Pecos and his own fair Apache land.

Had not the Indian youth been accustomed to

night duty in his home, he would have found it exceedingly difficult to distinguish his white foes.

Slowly and carefully he made his way downward, being forced to leave his rifle secreted in the rocks. But he reasoned that this was best—that should he, when the war-spirit of his people controlled him, fire off the weapon, the report might draw down death upon him.

Detaching a short lance from his back, Black Eagle now used this to aid him in his descent, and soon he reached a point directly above the two men, and but some twenty feet from the level of the cove-like space in the side of the range.

Here he stood; the rock on one side, and a border of cedar bushes on the other.

So intent was he in gazing down upon his intended victims, and forming plans to slay them, that he failed to observe a yawning opening in the rocks behind him—saw not a monster bear that stole from this cavern—and knew not of his danger until a fierce growl struck his ear!

The next instant, the young Apache was in the clutch of the huge beast!

Quick as lightning, Black Eagle made a super-human effort, he being frantic with rage at being thus foiled in his mission by a bear, to free himself. At the same moment, he drew back his right arm, and thrust the lance into the monster's breast.

Together they both toppled over the edge of the shelf, and rolled down to the level of the partially-inclosed space where Gold Buttons Bill and Nugget Nick were eating their evening meal, and but a few yards from them.

The agile Apache was not injured by the rocks, as he clung tight to the bear; but he was bleeding from a dozen wounds made by the claws of the beast. He succeeded in disengaging himself, and sprung to his feet, stationing himself with his back against the rock wall, as, with a fierce growl, the brute again rushed upon him.

His belief was, that the white men would shoot him before they did the bear.

Then came the reports of their revolvers.

Black Eagle heard no more.

The rest was oblivion.

When he recovered, as has been seen, he was dumfounded at finding the hated pale-faces binding up his wounds. He closed his eyes, but his thoughts flew like wild-fire. A gratitude was born in his savage heart that would never die, Apache though he was.

Yet he felt that it would be impossible for him to express that feeling in words. And, besides, he was averse to receiving aid and care from those whom he had been seeking to slay. Consequently, at the first opportunity, he dragged himself to the cliff, and up the same; although every movement gave him great torture.

He kept on, aiming only to place as great a distance as possible between himself and the two whites, and avoid being discovered by them. Regaining his rifle, having left his lance behind him, the youth pressed on; crawling like a wounded beast for some distance, when he was forced to halt from sheer weakness.

Gazing around, he now saw the two white men riding down the shelf.

Then came the rifle reports from a point quite near him; so near, that he saw those who fired the guns were white, and that they aimed at the two riders below.

Here was an opportunity to favor those who had befriended, in place of slaying him.

With a great effort, the boy succeeded in bringing his rifle to an aim.

When he realized that his shot had killed one of the white skulkers, he could hardly repress a whoop of exultant victory. But prudence bade him be silent.

Black Eagle had slain his first white foe, won his first scalp, and at the same time done those toward whom he had feelings of gratitude a favor—perhaps, indeed, had insured their future safety. This was probably the case, for he beheld the other dastard crawl hastily away in seeming fright.

He knew not whether his white friends were wounded or not, but he knew they were not killed, for they continued on as before, toward the town.

Suffering as he was, Black Eagle resolved to make his way down the steep mountain-side, and secure the scalp of the dead skulker—the trophy that would be the means of placing the first eagle-feather in his fillet. So repudiating wounds and weakness, with the fortitude of his people, the youthful red-skin started on his perilous and painful mission, down the rugged precipice.

CHAPTER V.

A MUSHROOM MUNICIPALITY.

HARD-UP was situated in the midst of the foot-hills at the base of the mountains, and was, like hundreds of other mining towns. It was, at the time of which we speak, quite small; there being not more than thirty slab shanties, a few "wicky-ups," dug-outs, and rude tents.

There was one building, considerably larger than the others; it being the principal depot for the sale of whisky, and also the only place of en-

ertainment for man and beast. The stage, which ran between Hard-up and San Diego, made halt here; the owner of the line stabling his horses at this "hotel," as the landlord proudly termed his establishment.

It had a rude sign, swinging in its front, upon which was lettered—

"POISON PALACE."

IRON-SHEATHED ROOM IN THE REAR FOR TENDERFEET."

The proprietor was, according to his own assertion, a perfect terror, a "bad man from 'way back;" and one, to hear him boast, would, did he not know him, believe he was listening to the most merciless and bloodstained desperado to be found among the western mines.

The truth was, he was a great coward, and it was a wonder to many who knew his weakness in this respect, how he had dared venture into such a section of the country, where every man might be said to carry his life in his hand.

But, being the sole owner of the only whisky pharmacy on the Soledad Mountains, he was a man of considerable importance, and he was well aware of the fact. He had, besides, tolerably good judgment, and a ready tact in getting along peaceably with his wild patrons.

Miners, of the stamp who made up the burg of Hard-up, were men who, if not "down to bed-rock" in the way of dust, knew they were liable to be dead broke at any time, through drinking and gaming; and, when in this disagreeable condition, they had to depend on the landlord of "Pison Palace" for the stimulants so necessary to keep them in their normal state of mind and body.

In consequence of this, they, when drinking heavily, avoided quarreling with "Fresh Frank of Frisco," as their host designated himself.

Fresh Frank was an out and out Texan, who had merely on one occasion taken a trip to San Francisco, where, seeing no opening for business, he purchased a wagon-load of vile liquors, and journeyed back, on the San Antonio and San Diego stage road, to Franklin, a town on the American side of the Rio Grande. There he heard of the "strike" at Hard-up, and hastened to the new burg; where, having some capital, he had built and opened his "Palace" before ten cabins had been erected in the town.

Fresh Frank was tall, raw-boned, and really of great strength; although the boys asserted that he was ignorant of his powers in that respect.

He affected the Mexican in costume, and two heavy Colt's revolvers and a bowie-knife were constantly worn in his belt; but not one had ever seen him draw one of them, while it was often asserted that, if the weapons were loaded at all, they would not cock, from rust, or if so, would not explode.

Many a time had Fresh Frank been worked for drinks, through the knowledge of his cowardice; the miners getting up furious fights in fun, and shooting wild, thus, as the landlord believed, endangering his life. He would then treat all hands to whisky, to calm the turbulent waters.

Fresh Frank was a character.

He was peculiar in appearance, manner, and language.

His small eyes, whitish, and with but little expression, had gained for him the appellation of "Pig-Eye."

The bar of Poison Palace was quite extensive, and the gaming department was to the rear of the same, with no partitions between. The lodging-rooms were in the attic.

There was a large door at both front and rear, kept open for the free circulation of air, and benches within for the accommodation of those who wished to sit and talk between drinks. These, however, were occupied principally by "range bummers."

There had been no quartz-mining done as yet, although several rich finds, if the outcroppings were to be depended upon, had been discovered.

Considering the fact that the town had not been in existence six months, there was a goodly amount of "dust" in circulation; and many there were of the miners who were believed to have considerable quantities of gold buried in their cabins or in other hiding-places.

At any rate, Fresh Frank had no cause to complain in the way of business, for he was continually sweeping "dust" into his drawer; and he understood to a nicely how to dilute his liquors in consonance with the state of inebriety of his customers—an act that required great judgment and caution, for if detected in it, his life would have been in danger.

But there was one great drawback to the prosperity of the burg.

This was the presence near it of a most desperate and daring band of road-agents. These called themselves the "Hyenas of Hard-up," and claimed to run the town. And they did run it much of the time.

Frequently they charged at headlong speed up the only street of the burg, shooting in every direction, *a la* cowboy, making breaks into cabins and through Poison Palace, and forcing contributions from all at the muzzles of their revolvers.

These bandits made an especial point of driving all the miners out the rear door of the hotel, and then a number of them would spur their horses up to the bar, order Fresh Frank to "set 'em up," then pass their canteens to be filled, and "corral" each a pair of bottles besides.

Nor did the landlord escape with this; for El Negro, the ruffianly captain of the outlaws, who, it was said, had "laid out" some forty men with his own hand, would order Fresh Frank, in a voice that chilled his blood, to deliver a pint and sometimes a quart of "dust" as "tax," threatening to blow the luckless landlord's brains out if he was not particularly lively about it.

And lively Fresh Frank would be.

He dared not refuse, for he valued life more than gold.

These raids were of no regularity, the bandits vanishing, none knew where, except that their head-quarters was quite near the town. The miners were confident that members of the band were often in Hard-up, acting as spies; but, as strangers were constantly going and coming, it was a matter of impossibility for these spies to be identified as members of the band of the "Scourge of the Soledad."

Perhaps if all had been losers to the extent that Fresh Frank had been, there would have been a more systematized and careful search for the Hyenas.

As it was by cunningly-arranged and executed plans, and by a thorough knowledge of the most favorable time to make a dash, the outlaws worked the burg for all it was worth, and seldom lost a man. In fact, they did pretty much as they asserted.

Fresh Frank had not only to stand his losses, but was jeered and laughed at for allowing himself to be systematically robbed when he carried a brace of "Colts," and had shot men enough—according to his own statements—to form three such bands as that of El Negro.

But this disgrace upon Hard-up had been of such long standing that the "citz" had at length become furious, and determined to wipe out the Hyenas.

Yet this was no easy undertaking.

There were numerous gorges in the vicinity of the town, the beds of which were of rock and betrayed no trail, while the range was of so cavernous a nature as to afford coverts for thousands of men, within a mile of the burg on either side.

Not only this, but there were very narrow passages, some arched and dark, which led to mount-inclosed vales, where many animals could be kept, grass and water being abundant.

No man in Hard-up, as may be supposed, was more anxious to annihilate the Hyenas than Fresh Frank. But from past events, the "citz" well knew that nothing was proposed or done in their midst that was not soon after known to El Negro and his murderous horde. Yet it was impossible to detect the spies for reasons previously mentioned.

The time was soon to come, however, when the miners of Hard-up would be enabled to gain, in a measure, revenge for the disgrace, robbery, and murder that had been done by the dastardly Scourge of the Soledad.

But this was not to be brought about by one of themselves, but by the gayly and handsomely attired young man we have met on the range above the town, with his frontier pard—by Gold Buttons Bill and Nugget Nick.

The latter had been fleeced of his gold by the rough element of Hard-up—the "card-sharps"—and had been given twenty minutes to leave the burg. If he remained, he was to be hanged like a dog.

Why this was, Nick had been at a loss to understand, for he had done nothing to merit banishment from the burg.

But Nick was, and had been ever since entering Hard-up, much under the influence of liquor.

He was able, however, to spot the men who were most active in driving him forth into the mountains; and, after he had become more like himself, he had come to the only reasonable conclusion under the circumstances in regard to it.

He decided that the men who proposed and hastened his banishment were, in some way, connected with El Negro's bandits, and had recognized him as one who had been active, and indeed one of the foremost, in breaking up the "Confiscators" at Bowlderburg; which band of outlaws had also been commanded by El Negro.

When Nick arrived at this decision, he thanked his lucky stars that he had escaped with his life; indeed, the wonder was that he had not been shot before he could leave the town.

While the scenes were transpiring up the range, on the mountain-side, lively times were in progress in Poison Palace; but of this, of course, our friends on the shelf knew nothing.

When the two ruffians shot down from their rocky covert at Gold Buttons Bill and Nugget Nick, then the latter was positive he had been recognized while at Hard-up by some of the outlaws, and that these had hastened after him, up the mountain-side, to assassinate him.

He explained this to Bill, who agreed with

him, and decided that Nick must be thoroughly disguised.

Gold Buttons Bill was at a loss to imagine who had put in that shot for them, but Nick still insisted it was the young Apache.

There was one less of their enemies, and that was some satisfaction.

The survivor, however, would doubtless convey the intelligence to El Negro that Nugget Nick had returned to Hard-up, and that he had picked up a pard.

It had been too dark for Bill to have been recognized, even had either of the two assassins known him; unless they had been skulking in the vicinity of their recent halting-place, and observed his face and form by the firelight, when he was examining the wounds of the Indian youth.

This did not seem likely, as that would have been a very favorable opportunity to have drawn a bead on both of them, and with little chance of making a misshot.

Before going to the town, the two men entered a cave, and built a fire; when Bill procuring the necessary implements from his saddle-bags, gave his comrade a clean shave, causing him to look like another man. A red shirt belonging to Bill was then put on by Nick in place of his blue one.

Some few other changes were made, and then the pair started on the war-path against the Hyenas.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RAID OF THE ROAD-AGENTS.

THE miners had left off work, partaken of their simple suppers, and were ready to make a full night of it by rushing things until midnight; if, indeed, they felt like breaking off then.

A rich strike had been made that day, along the bed of a small mountain stream, which coursed through a gorge that had not previously been prospected.

There had been the usual rush, claims had been staked, and large quantities of gold panned out; which proved that there were rich quartz leads further up at the head, or along the course of the little stream above, on the side of the range. Hence the unusual jollification of the crowd.

Those who were too lazy to work were just as jolly as the others, and the "card sharps" as well; for they knew they would be benefited by the "find" to no little extent.

Fresh Frank was in his glory.

It was seldom that he indulged freely in his own merchandise, but when such a thing did occur he went it heavy; and, on this night, he had taken a good start toward extravagant hilarity.

This circumstance added to the enjoyment of the crowd.

A half-dozen monte games were in full blast, there being not less than five hundred dollars in the smallest.

There were a number of strangers in the crowd, who had arrived that evening from San Diego and other towns below on the Rio Grande.

Some there were who had not traveled three miles to reach Hard-up; but this fact was not known, and they pretended to have come down the Rio Bravo. One of these strangers made himself an object of notice, from the fact that he was the heaviest bet in the room. Indeed, he appeared to have gold without stint.

He was a man who would draw attention in other ways, however, for he was tall and thin, quick as a flash in movement, and evidently quite nervous in temperament. He was almost as dark-skinned as a Mexican.

He wore a long black beard that corresponded with his hair and eyes.

Had he been particularly noticed by some keen-eyed person, who had suspicion as to his character, he might have been detected in casting meaning glances at two or three ruffianly-appearing men in the crowd, who were undoubtedly desperate villains. One must, however, have been keen and watchful in the extreme to have detected these signals.

After winning an unusually large bet, this man invited all hands to the bar. This caused a round of cheers as the motley crowd pressed forward to "irrigate."

Fresh Frank clicked glasses with the liberal stranger, and swallowed a copious draught of his own whisky.

Then the landlord gave a "ker-whop" that drowned the hum of conversation and caused all to become silent, the crowd gazing at their host, who was evidently "half seas over." They began to look for some fun out of him, and hoped he would have something entertaining to say.

And they were not disappointed.

Fresh Frank shot out another yell, and sprung upon the bar, knocking his heels together as he jumped upward from the slab, and swung his long arms about like a wind-mill.

"O-o-oh, yes!" he shouted. "Pards, bevees, pilgrims o' ther Rockies! Hyer I am. Fresh Frank o' Frisco, an' not so fresh arter all, when yer try me!"

"Tis hyer burg air Hard-up, but thar ain't

nary pilgrim in ther burg what's goin' ter be hard up fer long. We've struck hit rich ter-day, an' this hyer locate air goin' ter be XXX—bet yer bosom-pins an' ole socks, ef ye w'ars any!

"Boyees, I'm Fresh Frank o' Frisco, yer most obsequious obejent, ther long-horn howler o' San Antone 'riginally.

"Nary onc't war I ever know'd ter turn a broke pilgrim 'way from my bar dry." (Cheers from the range bummers.) "I'm ther scalper-slasher o' Seguin; I should perspire ef I ain't! When I waltz'd inter Hard-up hit war ter stay, ef I hed ter shoot er slash two pilgrims every mornin' afore breakfast. I'm a howler from Howlin'burg, an' don't yer disremember hit!

"Perty much all on yer knows how I've pan ned out sence I slapped up P'ison Palace. I've slung bug-juice 'roun' loose in a lib'ral way, 'cause blame me ef I could help it! I war borned with a hankerin' ter help everybody 'long what wanted a boost, an' I shell be thet way till I skip over ther range. But, dang my duckits, ef I don't kick ag'in' bein' robbed!

"This hyer burg suits me ter a dot, but by ther grim Moses, thar ain't shiny flakes enough fer ten mile up an' down ther range ter hire me ter stay hyer ef El Negro an' his cantankerous cut-throats air goin' fer ter lunge in on me an' wring me dry every time I gits a few slugs ahead!

"I ain't a-goin' ter be stomped inter the yearth by a passel o' bag-slashers, what gits ther drap onter we-uns every time an' waltzes off with our dust. Hit's a disgrace ter Hard-up, an' we're ther laughin'-stock o' ther hull range, an' ther Grande throw'd in.

"Hyer I bees, a hundred an' sixty pound o' bone an' muscle, wi' no extra meat, an' when ther cussed crooked galoots lungen in an' p'ints thar shooters, I hev ter wait on 'em like a nigger an' shell out all I've tuck in sence they come last. They jist bluffs we-uns every time, an' knows jist when fer ter make a break inter Hard-up, which proves they hes gut spies an' knows our hull biz.

"El Negro makes his brags thet he runs this hyer town, an' he comes ormighty cluss ter ther truth—dang my duckits ef he doesn't!

"Boyees, I'm chuck-full o' tangle-foot an' tongue, ter-night. Liquids an' lip air trumps with me, but I'm jist b'ilin' over ter jark a rope wi' ther bizness-eend round El Negro's neck! I'm a common pilgrim—no gilt-edged galoot 'bout me—but I means what I spit out!

"Hard-up hev gut ter be run by honest miners, instid of a batch o' bag-slashers. Them what's bin crowdin' the mourners must pick out thar own monument. Hit's enough ter make a pious pilgrim sw'ar like a hull corral-full o' Captain Kids, fer ter be robbed this-a-way, 'bout every two weeks—dang my ole dogs, ef 'tain't!

"Hyer we-uns air, a hefty crowd ter be 'lowin' a knock-kneed greasy cuss what hangs out in a hole in ther hills somewhar, an' w'ars a Greaser's cog, ter jist bog us down with insults and disgrace, rob us, an' pour down our whisk'.

"Great Jeshosaphat! Air this ter go on? I says, no!"

This was greeted with loud cheers, and stamping of booted feet.

"I, Fresh Frank o' Frisco says, no! We'll waltz 'roun' ther rocks, an' keep guard night an' day, so as ter know when El Negro air comin'. Then we'll corral his outfit, an' string 'em up!"

Loud cheers and yells filled the room.

"Go it, Frank!"

"Good fer ther p'ison-slinger!"

"Rah fer ther boss o' P'ison Palace!"

"Long time 'tween drinks, ole man!"

These outcries came from all sides.

There was a strange light in the eyes of the swarthy stranger, and his burning gaze was fixed upon Fresh Frank; but he was unnoticed, all being looking intently at the speaker.

"Pards o' Hard-up," continued the landlord, "I'm a rip-snorter when I gits my mad up, which ain't often, es yer know. But I'm a wild man on wheels, an' jist hankers ter wade in thar gore o' thar cussed Hyeners! Thet El Negro knows he ain't decent enough ter w'ar a white name, so he runs the Mex' racket.

"I says, le's go gunnin' fer Hyeners, an' ef I doesn't make my tally, I'll errigate all ther citz o' Hard-up free gratis ther hull day an' night arter we roves back ag'in! How's that fer altertude?"

Continued cheers answered him.

"Mebbe so yer all thinks I'm a worthless cuss, 'cause I stands ahint my bar, an' deals out ter-rantaler juice; but jist try me outside, on a hunt fer El Negro, an' yer'll find thar ain't no flip-flop 'bout me, but thet I am Fresh Frank o' Frisco, an' a cyclone stunner when I gits on ther hum."

"Thet caterwampus cuss'll find out he's stirred up ther anermiles onc't too much. Dang'd ef I ain't 'shamed when I think I've 'lowed him ter run P'ison Palace, when I could ha' bored the critter ef I'd ba' know'd he war goin' ter drop in on me!"

"He'll find out he's on boggy ground, and may slump inter Tophit nex' time he glides in arter Frank's whisky an' duckits. I've bin a bob-tailed lunertie ter 'low him ter bluff me off. He's my meat, an' I'll mince him yet. He'll know we've struck hit rich on another

level, an' he'll lunge in when I'm plum alone, ef we-uns doesn't go gunnin' arter him.

"He's gut spies inter our burg, an' he knows jist how many ounces air lost an' won hyer every night, and how many drinks goes over my bar. Cuss ther critter!

"Thar needn't be any funeral 'spenses when we jarks ther cuss outer ther wet, fer we'll hang him up ther range, whar pilgrims can see his carkiss from ther foot-hills. I say, pard—" Fresh Frank stopped abruptly, and turned pale as death, while the room became as silent as the tomb; all starting in their boots, while their countenances showed the extreme of astonishment, mingled with bewilderment.

Some clapped their hands to the butts of their pistols, and all gazed, with parted lips, toward the main entrance to Poison Palace, while none attempted to move.

What has caused this?

It was a sound outside in the street—a sound that many of them had heard before.

It was the headlong gallop of many horses, speeding up the street. It was the first time it had been heard approaching the town, instead of departing.

All knew that it was caused by a large cavalcade.

They also knew that no such body of men would enter that isolated town at that hour, and at that rate of speed, except the outlaw band of El Negro!

All knew, as well as if they saw the masked riders, that the bandits were coming to make another raid. But they also knew that the outlaws were coming to their doom—that, the room being full of miners, the cut-throats could be all slain, and at little risk to themselves.

Yet, it was so strange a time, and the dash was so desperate, that the men of Hard-up seemed paralyzed.

The sound came nearer, causing the frail building to tremble.

Revolvers sprung from scabbard, and the click of pistol locks, as the hammers were drawn back, sounded on all sides.

For a minute or two, Fresh Frank stood, bending over his bar, his form trembling, his face pallid, and his little pig-eyes distended. Then, when there was no doubt as to the character of the night-riders, he turned about, evidently intending to jump down behind the bar and seek hiding; but, at that very instant, the sharp crack of a revolver sounded through the room, to the astonishment of all, and the landlord fell to the floor.

At once every eye was turned toward the point from whence the report had sounded, near the end of the bar.

There stood the tall, dark man who had won so heavily at monte, a curl of smoke rising above his head.

For an instant he met the gaze of the crowd, toward which he leveled two deadly revolvers.

The citizens were dumfounded.

Nearer came the noise of the advancing horsemen from without.

The stranger, who had shot Fresh Frank, sprung upon the counter with his pistols leveled. Then, before a weapon could be raised, he bounded to the other end of the bar, near the entrance, and then upon the floor.

At that moment, the rush and thunder of the outlaw band betrayed the fact that they were galloping down the side of the building toward the rear.

Many revolvers were leveled at the stranger, but he dashed behind the screen and out upon the street.

Yells, most vengeful and terrific, filled Poison Palace. There was a rush of many toward the rear entrance, and of others toward the front.

Just then two strange horsemen galloped headlong down the street, and gave a yell that was exultant and joyous.

More shots and cries were heard in the rear of the building, mingled with the snorting of affrighted horses.

A perfect pandemonium ruled in and around the establishment of Fresh Frank of Frisco, but that worthy individual heard it not. He lay senseless behind his bar, with the track of a bullet along his skull. And it was best so.

CHAPTER VII.

AFTER THE STORM.

GOLD BUTTONS BILL and Nugget Nick had just struck the north end of the rough street, upon each side of which were the shanties that formed the town of Hard-up, when they heard the sound made by the fast-galloping horde of masked night-riders, who, at that moment, entered the burg at the opposite end of the street.

The moon had arisen a few minutes previous, but the night was hazy and far from being clear.

Yet the forms of horses and men could readily be distinguished by the pair of pards, the glister of arms and the fact that the riders were masked as well.

Bill and Nick halted instantly, in the utmost amazement. For at least a minute both were silent. Then Nick exclaimed:

"Dang dyspep' ginerly, ef thar ain't ther con-

demned bag-slashers o' Hyeners, I'll swaller my big toe! They're on ther big buzz, an' air goin' fer ter run P'ison Palace ter-night, er make a big try.

"But cuss my carkiss ef I doesn't b'lieve they'll slip up on hit this trip! What in thunderation's up with 'em that they dash in when ther boyees air all in ther Palace?

"Thar's fun ahead, Bill, ole pard, er I'm a Greaser! We-uns' roved jist in time ter take in ther cirkuss."

"I don't understand it," said Bill. "This is a strange time for them to make a break toward corraling a town. They are strong in numbers, but, as you intimate, the hotel must be crowded with men.

"But, come on! We'll maybe take a hand in the game. I'd like to, anyway."

"I'm with yer, pard. Spur up, an' don't lose a sight o' ther boss show."

The two urged their horses down the street, which seemed madness in them, for a full score of masked men wers lashing their horses headlong toward them.

Both jerked revolvers, and cocking the weapons, were ready to defend themselves, or retreat between the shanties, as their judgment prompted. But, much to their surprise, the band of horsemen turned in between Poison Palace and the shanty next the same, disappearing from view.

At the same time our friends heard the sounds of the fight, the scattering pistol-shots, and the yells and whoops.

They spurred at full speed toward the main entrance of Fresh Frank's hostelry, side by side. Just as they came within a few feet of it, out from the door sprung a man in desperate haste.

The momentum of this individual was so great, that he could not stop himself in time, and so rushed directly between the two riders.

He carried a revolver in each hand, his arms hanging by his side, and the muzzles of the weapons pointing toward the ground. He had no time to raise them, when Gold Buttons Bill clutched him by his beard. It came from his face.

Both men recognized him.

It was El Negro, the Captain of the Hyenas, the Scourge of the Soledad Range!

Nugget Nick brought the butt of his revolver with great force, down upon the outlaw's head; the next moment clutching one arm and Bill the other, as the bandit sunk limp between them.

"Dang an' dog-gone everything, ef we-uns hain't tuck ther boss k'yard in ther game, pard Bill! Lo's skute quick, afore the crowd runs in onter us!"

Supporting the senseless outlaw as they rode, the pair caused their animals to gallop between the two shanties next above Poison Palace; disappearing from view, just as the crowd rushed from the bar.

There was no one in sight when the miners emerged, and they dashed wildly to the rear of the hotel, where the firing had ceased. Naught was now heard but the crashing of bushes, and the click of iron-shod hoofs upon the rocks, which betrayed the retreat of the band.

"Tie ther cuss to a tree hyer, so he won't git away, ef yer hain't ready ter gi'n him ther send-off."

Thus proposed Nick, when Bill objected to taking the captive into Poison Palace.

"He's our game," Bill had said. "He's a big find, and the Fates drove him right into our power. In some ways this has been the most eventful night I ever passed. Things have worked in a peculiar manner, certainly."

"I start down-range, to seek revenge for the murder of my father, after searching almost everywhere for this cowardly fiend, and I meet you, old pard, on the mountain-side. Then that Indian boy gets clutched by the bear, and we save him. He escapes from us when we think him unable to stand."

"Two outlaws, probably Hyenas who have followed you to wipe you out, shoot at us, and miss us both, when it really does seem that same young red-skin, in return for what we did for him, shoots one of them."

"On we come, with a view of gaining some information in regard to the bandits, and lo! the very one we sought rushes right into our power. It is the most remarkable chain of events I ever knew. But there is one fact you may not have considered, Nick."

"El Negro, this blot upon mankind, was in disguise. He was not with his band, but was in Poison Palace when they arrived. It looks as though there had been a plot arranged, and it has failed, on account of the Hyenas, probably mistaking their instructions, going to the rear instead of the front of the hotel."

"My belief is, that they were intending to bar the doors, and set fire to the building; burning it, and all within it!"

"This capture will work in our favor. We thus get the confidence of the 'citz,' and will work with them to clear the range of crookedness. El Negro hangs on a limb this night, and I, the son of the man he murdered, will tie the noose!"

Gold Buttons spoke rapidly, and in a deep voice, hatred and triumph plainly imprinted on

his handsome face, as he held the still senseless bandit chief against the trunk of a large sapling, while Nugget Nick bound the captive fast to the same, with a lariat taken from his saddle.

Bill, while speaking, scanned the face of the outlaw closely.

There was an ugly scar upon his jaw, which would have betrayed his identity had there been nothing else.

But the scar was not needed.

Having secured their prize, Nick said, in a tone of great satisfaction:

"Durn me, ef we hain't hed a streak o' stud-hoss luck sence we run ag'in' each other, pard! 'Pears like Providence hev picked out we-uns fer ter straighten ther crooked kinks o' human natur' 'roun' this locate, by skupin' in the wuestest hellyun on ther Divide."

"Thar! He can't wriggle much now ontill we-uns bu'sts up his wigglin' fer good. But that's the deuce ter pay, an' no pitch hot, in F'ison Palace. Squar' pilgrims an' Hyeners have chawed dirt, er I doesn't know what sich racket indercates."

"I'm sp'ilin' fer ter get a peep et ther circus, even ef ther performance air over. Thar, El Negro, stay thar! We-uns'll see you later."

"Stuff your handkerchief into his mouth, and ram it hard, Nick! He might give a signal that would spill our gravy. Those devils would make another dash, to rescue him, if they knew we had him foul—yes, even though they lost half the band in the attempt."

"That's a good idee, Bill. Ye're mighty right. Reckon I'll use his own rag."

"Anything you like—only be quick about it."

Nugget Nick dexterously gagged the outlaw chief.

The spot where they were was in the shadows, being surrounded by dense thorny bushes except on one side, where the shanty-wall afforded still better security from discovery. The pair of pards then mounted their horses, and rode directly into the front entrance of Poison Palace.

They wished to make an imposing *entree* into the burg to impress the "citz" with the fact that they were no ordinary individuals, and that they were there for no common purpose.

Taken altogether, they did make a very creditable and, indeed, remarkable picture, such as would be apt to attract the attention of any who might see them.

They had replaced their weapons in their belts.

Their entrance could not have been made at a time when it would command more notice, or give the crowd in Hard-up a better view of them at the first glance, for the Hyenas had, some time previous, vanished from view—or, at least, all who were able to do so—and the dead and wounded miners had been brought into the back part of the hotel.

The wounded were receiving the attention of a vagabond surgeon, who, luckily, had been sobered by the noise and excitement.

The rest were grouped around when the pards rode in at the door.

They paused in sheer astonishment, mingled with suspicion.

Bill and Nick raised their right arms, holding the palms of their hands toward the crowd, in token of amity. But the men of Hard-up were in no mood to receive strangers kindly. They evidently had a suspicion that two of the Hyenas were before them in disguise.

With a mad rush they surrounded the two pards.

Fresh Frank still lay unconscious behind the bar.

For a full minute all was silent.

The scene was an impressive one.

Bill and Nick were conscious that they were in a tight box, but they were as cool as icebergs. To all appearance, they were totally unconcerned.

Their arrival had not only greatly puzzled but had completely dumfounded the miners.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHITE AND SQUARE.

"THET's ther confounded cuss what we-uns gin' ther grand bounce outen ther burg, yester-day."

These were the words that broke the silence in Poison Palace.

They were uttered by a ragged rough, who pointed his dexter finger at Nugget Nick.

Our friends at once realized their position. The words of the range bummer had banished from many the somewhat favorable impression that the fearlessness of the two strangers had created.

"He's shaved off his whiskers, an' gut on new togs," added the bummer. "Whar'd he git 'em so soon without he's bin ter ther cave o' El Negro? He's a spy, an' orter be hung up fer seed!"

"Hold on, men of Hard-up!" cried out Gold Buttons in a commanding voice, as the citizens pressed closer upon them; "give white men a show to speak for themselves, and sling that rough out the door! But, first, allow my pard, Nugget Nick, to ask him some questions."

"Go ahead speedy, then!" bawled a miner.

"That's jist what I hankers ter do, boyees," exclaimed Nick. "Now, here's at yer, an' I reckon I'll strike ther bull's-eye. Whar's ther galoot what skinned me outen my duckets, flippin' paste-board too speedy fer me ter keep track on him?"

"Him an' his pards war ther crooked cusses what gut you an' yer pard bums ter run me outen ther burg. Whar air they now?"

"Yer can't perdue 'em, fer they war Hyeners, an' air et ther cave, er mebbe so they gut plugged in ther leetle circus yer hed a while ago."

"I met my pard, Gold Buttons, an' he fixed me up fer ther hunt arter El Negro. We're on ther war-path. We're gunnin' fer Hyeners, but we doesn't intend ter shoot ter kill, an' cheat Judge Lynch."

"That's my squar' story, an' yer kin chaw on-ter hit, an' spit hit out er swaller hit jist es yer chooses!"

Nick's words, and his daring manner, were not without their effect upon the 'citz.'

Some of them forced the bummer to the rear of the gaming-room, and bade him examine the faces of the dead and wounded bandits; for he was obliged to admit that the men who had won Nick's dust were not among the miners.

While this was going on, Gold Buttons once more addressed the crowd:

"Pards of Hard-up! We are honest men, and it is strange if some of you do not know us, or have heard of us. We were both in the crusade against El Negro, when he was captain of the Confiscators, up the range, a year ago."

"We broke that band up, and the leader, with a few of his cut-throats, came to the Soledad Mountains, picking up desperate characters, whites and Greasers, and so forming the band he called the Hyenas of Hard up. He claims to run this burg of yours."

"Pards, El Negro killed my father, and that was the reason I made war on him and his horde in Bowlderburg. I swore that I would yet tie a rope around his neck, and I mean to keep that oath to the letter. I was on the hunt for him when I met my old pard, Nugget Nick. He gave me information which pleased me much, and that was that El Negro was in this vicinity."

"But I'm getting dry, pards. We'll irrigate as soon as the investigators arrive. I see they are coming, and apparently they have discovered some evidence favorable to us."

Gold Buttons Bill threw one leg over the horn of his saddle, while Nick tore off a fresh chew of tobacco, equally unconcerned.

Shouts came from the examining committee as they dragged the bummer forward, his bloated face now ghastly. They bore also one of the wounded outlaws, whose black mask still covered his face.

The latter was placed upon a table.

The mask was then removed.

The face of the bandit was pale as that of a corpse.

The bummer was forced to stand beside him, while Nick was asked if he recognized the wounded Hyena.

"That's one o' ther condemned cusses what won my duckets onfair, an' driv me outen ther burg," assented the borderman, with evident relief and much emphasis.

"Dare ye deny it? yer or'nary bummin' bunch o' rags!"

This was addressed to the miserable wretch who had accused him of being a spy.

"That's ther galoot, er one on 'em, I'll own," was the trembling response; "but I sw'ar I didn't suspicion he was a Hyener."

The wounded outlaw raised himself to a sitting posture, and stared at Nick with his glazing eyes. Then he said, in a faint voice:

"I'm a goner! Old Death's got a grip on me. I've been mighty crooked, but I'll do one squar' thing afore I flop over ther range. That man is white!"

"He hunted us at Bowlderburg—both of them did, Gold Buttons Bill and Nugget Nick. Ther cap'n war layin' fer 'em hyer, fer he know'd ther two men sent ter kill Nick hed failed. El Negro war afraid on 'em, knowin' they come fer ter break him up ag'in."

"Yer'll find yer duckets in my belt, Nick, fer I hedn't divided with my pard. Gi'n me a drink o' whisk', somebody!"

The dying bandit fell back.

A miner stepped behind the bar, and procured some liquor, which he gave him.

As the outlaw swallowed it, the man asked quickly:

"Whar's El Negro's cave?"

The dying wretch started up, his eyes glaring wildly, and cried out, angrily:

"I'm a robber, an assassin, a spy, but I'm no traitor to my chief!"

The exertion and the passion were too much for him. The next minute he was a corpse.

No sooner did the crowd realize this, and that the two strangers were "white and square," and on the war-path against El Negro, than apologies flew thick on all sides, accompanied by friendly looks and words of welcome. The two men then slid from their saddles, greatly relieved at the favorable turn affairs had taken.

Then Gold Buttons Bill inquired for the landlord.

Until this question was asked, none had thought

of Fresh Frank, so exciting had been the scenes around them.

Soon they espied his recumbent form, and they perceived that he had been wounded.

"He war shoted by El Negro," explained one. "Hit war ther commencement o' ther rumpus. How in thunderation did ther boss cut-throat git away?"

Bill and Nick said nothing.

The bandit chief had been reserved, as their best card to play them into safety, had not the dying spy cleared them of suspicion; and they wished to get a closer hold upon the men of Hard-up, by bringing in the leader of the Hyenas.

Fresh Frank, on returning to consciousness, gazed around him in terror.

His wound, it had been found, was far from being a serious one.

"Brace up, Frank!"

"He doesn't 'pear very fresh now!"

"We knocked 'em all blind, Frank, what didn't skin out!"

"Everything's hunk, 'ceptin' ther stiffs, an' they're half-bored Hyenas, Frank!"

"Yer kin brag now, ole pard, that yer hes bin plugged by El Negro!"

"Straighten yer carkiss, an' sling out some pison!"

Such were the exclamations that greeted the landlord, but he seemed not to fully comprehend them.

"We can't wait. We're too dry for that," said Bill, as he strode behind the bar, and called out:

"What is it, pards? Nominate your liquids. This is my treat, and I ordered it half an hour ago."

The young man slung out the bottles and glasses in a graceful and dexterous manner, and a rousing cheer burst forth for Gold Buttons Bill.

"He's solid, boyees, er I'm a condemned three-legged cayuse!"

"He's ther pure quill, is Bill!"

"Pure es a bar o' bullion!"

So said the citz, as they crowded around the bar.

"We-uns hev gut game enough fer a big funeral," said one, as he poured out his liquor.

"An' live game enough fer a hefty lynch picnic," added another.

Boisterous laughter was universal, as the crowd swallowed their whisky.

"Pards of Hard-up," called out Bill; "you all drank without waiting for me. Fill up again!"

They needed no second invitation.

Nugget Nick sat upon the end of the bar, enjoying the scene, and admiring the ways and manners of his pard, as well as thanking his stars that he had been so fortunate as to meet him.

All clicked glasses with Bill and Nick, and it was a general pour down all around.

Then Gold Buttons Bill figured up the price of the drinks, and placed the gold in the hand of Fresh Frank. The dull, pig-like eyes of the landlord brightened, and he began to feel almost equal to business.

Three cheers for the two pards from up-range were then called for, and were given, while sombreros whirled in the air.

It really seemed as if El Negro's day was ended, and Gold Buttons Bill instead was running the town. Bill had taken them by storm. He could have been chosen sheriff of the burg, an hour after his arrival.

But our friend had yet a card to play, that would secure him that position, although he was far from seeking it.

CHAPTER IX.

GOLD BUTTONS BILL'S TRUMP CARD.

BILL had not forgotten the wounded men of Hard-up, but had taken the doctor's word that they were doing as well as could be expected.

But, after the boisterous clamor had subsided, he inquired of that functionary if he could not extend his treat to these unfortunate men; and, getting an affirmative answer, he at once helped himself to two quart-bottles of champagne and one of brandy, and hastened with Nick, many of the miners following, to the rear of the gaming-room.

The wounded men were regaled with the wine and brandy, and those who wished to smoke were furnished with cigars, pipes, and tobacco.

Thus were all the honest citizens of Hard-up made as agreeable and happy as the nature of the case would admit.

Gold Buttons Bill had become a veritable prince in the estimation of the men of the town; and, as he had interceded for the miserable range bummer, who had endeavored to prejudice them against Nick and himself, thus saving the poor wretch from rough usage, the pards of this man looked upon Bill as superior to any one they had ever met.

But all were wrought up into a state of fury, when they thought of the recent outrageous raid of the Hyenas into their town; and saw what the intent of El Negro and his band evidently was.

The result was, that a miner yelled:

"Hang ther cussed cut-throats up ter a limb!"

This was like touching a lighted match to a keg of gunpowder, for an answering yell came that was terrible to hear.

Then a rush was made, by the mob, to where the wounded bandits lay. Gold Buttons Bill and his pard were, for the time, forgotten.

They strode back to the bar. Neither of them cared to witness what they knew was to follow.

Fresh Frank had become more like himself, and addressed Bill at once:

"Gold Buttons Bill, I've heerd o' yer, an' I'm ormighty glad fer ter see yer in our slam-up burg! Hit hain't hed no drawbacks ter mention, 'ceptin' hevin' ther cusses o' Hyenas runnin' in on us onc't in awhile."

"I war s'picious of El Negro when I see'd ther galoot ter-night, though I must own I didn't s'pose hit war him until I got a good gaze et him. Then he jarked his shooter, an' blazed et me, afore I could git a bead onter him."

"Thet's all I knew. I wilted right thar, fer my brain-box got a hefty jar, an' I jist floated inter nowhar. How ther cuss come ter git away from ther boyees, I can't jist undercom-stand."

"Hit's too ormighty bad, fer he'll raid me, dead sure, when thar's nobody 'ceptin' bums hyer, an' they'll skute first pop. I think I'll hev ter levent ter Franklin ag'in, er San Diego, whar a white man hes some show. Thar's only one thing could happen what 'ud make me easy, an' cause me ter linger on in P'ison Palace."

"What's that?" asked Gold Buttons, with a smile.

"Ef yeou'll run this hyer burg, sarvin' as sheriff an' gin'ral boss o' things, I'll stay. Ef yer don't, I'll go, dead sartain; fer I ain't ready ter flop over ther range, an' besides I don't want ter be planted hyer in this cussed country whar I may be laid 'longside of a Hyener. Whew! Hit makes me plum sick ter think o' hit."

"Le's p'ison ourselves jist a leetle. This bar air free ter yeou two pards es long es yer linger, ef yer won't be sheriff o' ther burg. When yer is, I'll charge double fer yer errigates ter git squar'."

All laughed heartily.

"Nobody has proposed me for office," said Gold Buttons; "and besides, I'm a stranger. You have old 'citz' enough here that are capable of filling the office, and it is strange you have not elected one before—on account of El Negro and his band, if nothing else."

"We'd orter hed one, but I'm glad we never did, fer we kin 'lect yeou, Bill. I'll work the racket myself, ef yer'll only say ye'll serve."

"Time enough to talk about that. I'm on the war-path now, and I intend to clean those Hyenas out."

Nugget Nick had led the horses out, and paid a visit to their captive. He now returned and gave his pard to understand that El Negro was perfectly safe.

"Ther Lynch picnic air over," said Nick. "Ther or'nary cusses what disgraced ther footstool have gone up, er ruther down, I reckon; but thar's plenty more on 'em ter corral an' choke off."

"How about El Negro's daughter?" asked Gold Buttons. "Has she been seen in this section? She was with him when he was leader of the Confiscators."

"She's bin with her dad," answered Fresh Frank. "I see'd her onc't, but she wore men's togs. Howsumdever, her ha'r would give her away every time, ef her face didn't."

"She's a purty piece, but a reg'lar she-devil, hevin' ther same sorter black eyes es El Negro. She'd jist es li'los shoot a man es a snake, an' she needs chokin' off jist es bad es any o' ther gang. Ef we'uns should corral her dad, an' do fer him, she'd raise merry Old Ned 'roun' Hard-up; an' yeou remember what I'm givin' yer 'gardin' her."

"She's a holy terror," put in the doctor.

"But she couldn't do much harm after the band were cleaned out," suggested Bill.

"Don't yer git mistook 'bout that," said the landlord. "She'd git a gang o' Greasers ter-gether afore a week passed, an' lunge in on us."

"Well," said Gold Buttons, "time will tell. Give me a light for my cigar, will you? Thanks. I say this much. We ain't going to be bluffed by a woman who has place i' herself beyond the pale of consideration as to her sex."

"I'm goin' ter send ter ther fort, an' git a cannon," asserted Fresh Frank. "I'll plant hit at ther eend o' ther bar, with a sheet over hit. Then, when ther Hyeners ride in ther door, I'll make a dodge under ther counter, an' sock ther fire o' my cigar inter ther primin'."

"Hit'll blow ther hull front out o' P'ison Palace, I reckon, but hit'll hash all ther Hyeners. That's a good racket. Hit's funny I never tho'rt o' it before."

"You be hanged!" said the doctor, contemptuously. "El Negro would bore your fool cabase for you before you knew what you were about."

"Don't be so dang'd discouragin', doc, er yer'll run one plum wild. My head air all on ther buzz now."

Fresh Frank's face was so comical in expres-

sion that all were forced to laugh when he whined this out.

The whoops and yells of the mob now sounded nearer.

"Thar's a few less in El Negro's cabin ter-night!"

"We've strung 'em up fer keeps!"

"Done by request o' ther principal citz o' Hard-up."

"Fotch on some more, nowthat we've got our hands in!"

"Ther war-path on ther Hyeners air open!"

Such were the cries along the street, and then cheers were given for the pards from up-range.

Again Gold Buttons Bill "set 'em up."

Then he addressed the crowd:

"Pards of Hard-up, you have had quite a circus to-night; but the last act is yet to come. I have arranged a little amusement for you, if you will do as I direct.

"I want you all, the doctor and the landlord included, to fall in line, facing the rear door, and not to look toward the bar until I give the order 'about face.'

"Will you promise to do this?"

"Ya-as!"

"Sartain!"

"Betcher life!"

"Rah fer Bill!"

"Very well. Do as I have said, and at once. Delay may spoil our fun. But I want another promise from you; and that is to allow me to tie the rope around the neck of El Negro, when we corral him. He murdered my father, and I then took an oath to do this."

"Are you willing to promise this?"

The outcries were, as before, in the affirmative.

These singular and totally undreamed-of requests of Gold Buttons were at once obeyed; the men of Hard-up ranging themselves in lines, facing the entrance to the hotel.

Midway between the inner end of the bar and the south wall of the building, at the point which divided bar from gaming-room, was a post that supported the upper flooring.

As soon as the miners had arranged themselves, Bill and Nick started for the shaded side of the next shanty, where they found El Negro, their captive, just as they had left him. Indeed, it would have been impossible for him to have freed himself without assistance; and it would have been very difficult for his followers to have found him, even had they known he was still in the town, and had searched for him.

Nick quickly unbound the outlaw chief, while Bill re-adjusted the false whiskers, and placed a black mask over his face.

The outlaw chief was still gagged.

"Walk on, and carry the screen before us after we enter the door!" ordered Gold Buttons; "some of the boys might, in their curiosity, forget their promise."

"Dang my dyspeptic disperish, ef I'd like ter be in El Negro's fix!" said Nugget Nick. "Fact air, I wouldn't fer ther hull creation."

"Nor I," returned Bill. "What's this world worth to a man when his wife is a widow?"

"Durned little," was the reply.

Such words were not very encouraging to the Captain of the Hyenas.

They reached and entered the door, Bill dragging El Negro along, by a grasp of the bandit's arm.

Nick held the screen that stood before the door, in front of Bill, and placed it as directed. Bill forced his prisoner's back against the post we have mentioned, and bound him fast to it.

The screen hid the captive from the men of Hard-up. Then Bill yelled:

"About face, pard's!"

No order was ever executed more quickly. In fact, some lost their balance, and fell to the floor, in their eagerness to see the last act in the "circusing" of the eventful night.

They saw nothing but the Venetian screen that usually stood before the door, with Bill standing at one end of it, and Nick at the other.

"Pards of Hard-up, I am about to show you a tableau; but you must promise to keep your position until I give you leave to come forward."

All shouted that they would.

At a signal from his comrade, Nick drew the screen quickly away.

So bewildered were the miners, that they did not at first realize that the captive thus exhibited was El Negro, the Captain of the Hyenas, and Scourge of the Soledad Range.

"Men of Hard-up," said Bill, at the same time tearing off the mask and beard, and jerking the gag from the outlaw's mouth; "allow me to introduce to you, El Negro, the leader of the Hyenas, who was captured by my pard and myself before we had been five minutes in your town!"

"I came here to hunt him to his death, to tie a lariat about his neck, but I little thought it would be my good fortune to accomplish his capture so soon."

"I told you the last act in the drama of the night was to come, and I have kept my word. This is the first scene in that act; the next must

be up the mountain-side. El Negro, the cowardly murderer of my father, and of scores of other honest men—he, who has been the bane and terror of the Divide, must hang high, where those who are following his footsteps can see him, as an example to show that crime must surely, sooner or later, meet with a terrible punishment."

The citizens were silent.

They knew not what to say.

They could hardly believe their senses.

Thus they remained for a full minute, until all knew without doubt that Bill's words were true—that the murderous miscreant, El Negro, was really secured to the post, and in their power. Then, such a terrific yell of exultation burst from every throat, as almost to extinguish the lights in the apartment.

After this came three tremendous cheers for Gold Buttons Bill, and Nugget Nick, the corrallers of the crooked.

Fresh Frank was, perhaps, the most rejoiced of any in the crowd, and his yell the loudest.

"Break ranks!" ordered Bill; "and proceed to inspect our important and celebrated captive!"

Then followed a mad rush, and the outlaw chief was surrounded by that mob of furious men. But he quailed not. He met their glances fearlessly, and hurled terrible imprecations at them, although his swarthy face was of an ashen hue, proving that he realized his impending fate.

Well did El Negro know that his race was run, that pity and sympathy were unknown in Hard-up for such as he—that he was doomed to the death of a dog, and that in a very short space of time!

CHAPTER X.

PROFESSOR PILLS.

GOLD BUTTONS knew that no power on earth could control the maddened and furious miners, in connection with the doom of El Negro.

Every moment they grew more furious.

But little time could elapse before they would tear the bandit from the post, and drag him to execution.

Bill resolved that he would make sure of his oath of vengeance before the mob became uncontrollable. He knew that he held no little influence over them, and he was determined to use his power to its utmost limit, in connection with the lynching of the merciless outlaw.

With this view, he gave Nugget Nick an order to follow him, and the two left Poison Palace, going directly to their horses.

"Dang'd ef we'uns doesn't lose sight o' ther boss circus, ef we lingers long here, pard Bill!" exclaimed Nick. "They'll rush things through when they gits started, which'll be 'fore soon."

"We'll be in time, Nick; never fear. Get your horse, and lead him after me at once. We'll tie El Negro to the saddle, until we reach the base of the range."

Soon the two men entered the hotel, with their beasts; Bill crying out:

"Make way, pard's! Remember your promise. I must tie the lariat."

"Rah for Gold Buttons Bill!" yelled the crowd, in chorus.

The noose was soon adjusted, and the rope cast over the bandit's head.

"Nathaniel Night," said Bill, "or El Negro, as you here choose to call yourself, I sent you word at Bowldersburg, more than once, that I would hunt you to your death! That I had sworn to hang you—to choke out your miserable life!"

"You are not fit to die, but the longer you live the less fit you become; consequently, the sooner you go where you must answer for all your crimes the better. Your dastardly career is near its end. There is no escape for you."

"Have you anything to say? If so, say it now; for, when the men of Hard-up start a job they finish it instanter!"

Gold Buttons Bill held the slack of the lariat as he spoke.

The black eyes of the Hyena chief had been fastened upon him, all this time, in a gaze of hate and scorn.

"Do your worst!" he hissed. "You are a batch of cowards. You can tie a man fast, and then run your vile tongues in insulting language. A brave lot, truly!"

"Unloose me! Give me a knife, and I'll fight half a dozen of you at a time. I scorn you, and hold you in contempt. My men, led by my daughter, will avenge me!"

"The days of Hard-up are numbered. Nina Noche is a chip of the old block, and woe to those who send me over the range, when she makes a break to avenge me! I wouldn't give a picayune for the lives of one of you."

"As for you, Gold Buttons Bill, when Nina learns that you have followed us here, that you captured and hanged me—as she certainly will know—then you had better say your prayers, and blow your brains out to escape the doom that will surely be yours. And Nugget Nick will share it with you."

"Yes, I killed your father, as I would any other man who resisted me. Had he remained

in Kansas City he might have been alive now. But what's the use of wasting breath? Do your worst, I say. I scorn and defy you!

"I can die but once, and then I'll haunt each one of you, if there is such a thing as a spirit revisiting the earth.

"Give me a drink, and then string me up; but tell my daughter, and my brave boys, that I died as their leader should—game to the last gasp!"

During this long and extraordinary speech, some of the miners more than once sprung forward to clutch the rope and end it, but Gold Buttons Bill waved them back, telling them to be patient.

In compliance with the miscreant's request, the doctor stepped forward with a glass of liquor and held it to his lips.

As the last drop was swallowed, El Negro choked violently, and then said:

"There's a piece of the rag they gagged me with in my throat. Pull it out! I'll get all the choking necessary when they string me up."

The doctor did as requested.

"Time's up!" began to be called out from the crowd.

"Unloosen him, and put him on Nick's horse," ordered Gold Buttons Bill, in a commanding voice. "We've lingered long enough, I should say."

As he spoke he sprung into his own saddle. His order was obeyed, and the bandit's arms were bound behind him.

The face of the wretch was murderous in expression and ghastly pale.

No time was lost.

As the crowd was about starting, the landlord pleaded:

"Some on yer stay with me! Dog-gone hit, what'll I do of Nina Noche runs in on me, an' raids P'ison Palace? This air a dickens of a hurrah fer Fresh Frank o' Frisco, I don't think!"

But Frank's words passed unnoticed, even by the range bummers, who knew they would get free drinks if they remained. There was still greater attraction for them ahead.

Fresh Frank drank about four fingers of his own liquor, and then contrived to squeeze his lank form into an empty barrel; the open end of the same being down. It was an exceedingly cramped position; but thus, with his nose near the bung-hole, Frank fixed himself, to await the return of the lynchers. His hope was that, should the Hyenas make a raid in the absence of the citizens, he would not be discovered.

The doctor had stolen back into the shadows of the room, where he was unobserved.

There he remained, with a curious expression on his bloated face, until the mob and their victim had left the hotel, and the landlord had hidden himself in the barrel. None remained except the wounded miners, and they were at the extremity of the room, which was in shadow.

Had one paid particular attention to this worthy, meaning glances might have been detected, passing between him and El Negro at the time he held the glass of brandy to the latter's lips. A suspicion, too, might have been entertained, when the doctor removed the piece of rag.

But nothing of this kind had been noticed.

This delectable member of the medical profession was simply known as "Professor Pills," and had been in the town ever since the Hyenas had arrived in the vicinity.

All were pleased to have him in the burg, on account of his professional skill, which was available even when he was drunk. Indeed, it was often asserted that Pills knew more about wounds and sickness when intoxicated than when sober.

When the "citz" had departed, and the landlord corralled himself, the doctor stole on tiptoe to the bar, helped himself to a drink, and put a bottle of brandy in each coat pocket. Putting a tumbler in a side-pocket, and taking a box of cigars and some matches, he made his way to a dark corner, where he secured a surgical-case, which he hung over his shoulder.

He then stole cautiously from Poison Palace, and proceeded stealthily toward the point to which the lynchers had gone, guided by the loud outcries made by them.

But Professor Pills did not follow in the trail of the men of Hard-up.

He kept to the right of their course, and parallel with the same.

There had been a gleam of relief in his eyes, when he heard Gold Buttons Bill say that El Negro must be hanged far up on the mountain-side.

Why was this?

Could it be that the doctor considered that, if the bandit chief were hanged on the level plain, he would be forced to stand upon the horse's back, with considerable slack to the rope, the horse being whipped from under him, which would undoubtedly break his neck?

Could it be that he considered, if El Negro were hanged as directed, on the mountain-side, he would be drawn up a limb, and the result would be different?

A keen detective, who had watched the doctor, might easily have come to some such conclusion; or, at all events, that Professor Pills felt a deep interest in the case.

CHAPTER XI.

MAKING THE TRIP.

THE moon, with a dim glow, struggled, as it seemed, through the sky, which was filled with a milky haze. Its dull light falling upon the rocky sides of the Soledad, revealed to a stranger an unusual scene.

Nearly a hundred red and blue-shirted miners were scrambling up the difficult steep, while in their midst was a gayly attired and handsome young man, holding the slack of a rope the noose of which was around the neck of a man, ruffianly and murderous in appearance.

El Negro was nearing the spot where he was to expiate a long life of crime.

Soon the mob reached their objective point, which was a landmark to travelers afar out on the western plain.

"Climb the tree, Nick, and I'll cast up the slack!" ordered Gold Buttons Bill.

The work of justice was soon over.

Hardly had the last man disappeared, however, when up from one side of the rock platform arose a human head, and then the form of Professor Pills slowly climbed upon the level shelf, bearing a heavy burden.

Quickly he dropped it.

It was the corpse of one of the Hyenas.

He then sprung to the tree-trunk, untied the rope, and let El Negro's body drop to the platform. Instantly he loosened the noose and then placed it around the neck of the corpse he had brought with him.

Professor Pills then pulled the dead body up as far as he could. It required a great exertion of muscle to execute his purpose, but he accomplished it.

Then he sprung to the side of El Negro, and unslinging his case of instruments, produced a pair of small nippers, which he thrust into the bandit's mouth.

He drew out a silver tube.

Brandy was then administered freely, while great beads of perspiration stood on the doctor's brow. He crawled to the edge of the shelf and peered down, all the while trembling violently. He then staggered to his feet and gazed nervously around him.

Satisfied that no one was near, he sunk upon his knees by the side of the bandit chief and placed his ear close to the left breast, at the same time holding the wrist of the outlaw between thumb and finger.

With a low but joyful exclamation, Professor Pills sprung erect and stood for a few moments in meditation.

A new idea seemed to enter his mind.

Without further hesitation, he began effecting an exchange of outer garments between the two Hyenas. This was hastily accomplished, for the professor knew that his life hung by a thread. Any of the men of Hard-up might return, to make sure that El Negro had not been cut down or that he was really dead.

The idea of the doctor was this: the citizens must not know that the body of the bandit chief had been borne away. They would see, of course, that it had been cut down; but they would not be likely to have the remotest idea who had done it.

With this view, he lifted the corpse upon which he had placed the clothing of El Negro and carried it to the south end of the platform, from the verge of which the rough and jagged walls were almost insurmountable. Down this steep he hurled the body of the outlaw which he had brought from the burg.

The professor knew that it could never be known it was not the corpse of the captain of the band.

By this time he was in such an excited and apprehensive state that he could scarcely walk. His nerves were all unstrung, and his muscles almost powerless.

He knew that he could not carry El Negro away, unless he braced himself up and banished his fears. This, with the aid of the brandy, he strove to do.

Seating himself, he gazed down toward the town.

He could distinguish no moving form on the mountain-side, although he scrutinized long and carefully.

He saw the glare of lights from Poison Palace, and wondered if they had missed him.

Not until then did he realize the magnitude of the tasks he had undertaken, and that he must accomplish them, or lose his life. The thought of this again started him to his feet, and to the side of his patient.

Again he examined him.

He saw that he could save the bandit chief.

What, but to serve El Negro, had brought him to Hard-up at the first?

Surely nothing else. He had played his game well too, and, thus far, had won every point.

Professor Pills had long been the tool of the outlaw leader, and had been well paid for his services; but he had fallen very low in the social scale before it had come to that, and it had been only to save his miserable existence that he had accepted such employment.

Strong drink had been the curse of his life.

But it was only the near past that the doctor now reviewed, and he congratulated himself upon his success thus far.

He arranged his instrument case, replaced his brandy bottles, lifted El Negro, and carefully proceeded along the narrow shelf, in a northerly direction. On he went, at times depositing his burden upon a rock, and resting. Eventually he entered a small cavern.

Passing a considerable distance into this, and seeming to know the way in the darkness, he entered a side passage, feeling along the wall to find the same.

Laying down his burden, he struck a match, the blaze revealing a small apartment, within which was a rude couch of skins, boxes of provisions, cooking utensils, wood, and candles. One of these last, the doctor ignited, and stood it upon a rock which served for a table. He then placed El Negro upon the couch, and gave him a powerful restorative.

Some of this medicine, with a bottle of brandy, he left on the table.

Writing a note of directions, in which he also stated what he had done and when he would return, and bidding the bandit chief remain in the cave, Professor Pills left the chamber, taking care to conceal the entrance to the cavern.

A little later, he had cut down the other lynched Hyenas, and hurled them into a cleft, to prevent the fact being known that one of them had been removed; and, in another half-hour, he was lying, in an apparent drunken slumber, in one of the dark corners of Poison Palace, under a gaming table.

He had crept there, unobserved, while the crowd of miners, with Gold Buttons and Nugget Nick, were making a night of it at the bar; Fresh Frank being behind the same, having evidently crawled out from his close "corral," the empty barrel, but little the worse for his confinement.

But the doctor had no intention of remaining long thus quiet.

Ere long he began to raise a great rumpus, kicking, groaning, and yelling, which drew the crowd, with lights, to investigate.

Professor Pills had gotten up a very pronounced case of *delirium tremens* for the occasion, or at least he pretended to be on the borders of it; and the half-intoxicated miners, believing he had been helping himself freely while they had been absent, and had since then been lying under the table, dragged him to the bar and gave him "the hair of the dog to cure the bite"—in other words, they gave him more whisky to bring him back to himself.

They had no end of fun with the Esculapius, and he was at heart the most rejoiced and relieved man on earth, for he had won every point in his game, it being impossible for any suspicion to be placed at his door in connection with his work of the night.

El Negro was alive, and Professor Pills little cared how soon the fact became known that the outlaw leader had been cut down and brought back to earth to continue his criminal career.

Verily, the doctor had labored in a manner worthy of a better cause and subject.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RANGE RETREAT.

We will now call the attention of the reader to the abiding-place of El Negro and his daughter, with the followers of the notorious bandit chief.

About one mile south of Hard-up there was a huge rent in the mountain range, apparently caused by some terrible convulsion of nature. This break extended so far into the mountains—its bed being of rock and devoid of all verdure—and was so gloomy and forbidding that no prospector would be likely to penetrate any great distance into it.

Many such exist in the mountains, at and in the country around the Soledad, the secrets of which none know except the fierce Apaches even to this day.

Perhaps El Negro had learned the existence of the one referred to from some renegade of the tribe mentioned.

At the distance of half a mile up this gulch, as it might be called, were numerous smaller rents or openings. A careful study by an experienced scout of the rock flooring of the arched passage we wish to inspect, would have discovered no sign of the presence within of either human beings or brutes, and that for the reason that the outlaw chief never permitted one of his band to approach or enter without having the hoofs of his horse well bound with pieces of blanket or buffalo-hide.

At the entrance to the vale from this dark natural passage stood always a sentinel—a ruffianly desperado, with crime stamped indelibly upon his face.

Such was the secret retreat of the Hyenas of Hard-up, as the followers of El Negro termed themselves.

By continuing up the shelf to a position between two of the peaks, a clear view of the foot-hills below, and of the far-stretching plain toward San Diego and other towns on the Rio Grande, could be obtained, and, of course, of the stage-road, for twice a week a Concord coach arrived in Hard-up from San Diego.

About a quarter of a mile from the foot-hills, was a creek, which ran parallel with the range,

and emptied into the Rio Grande. This was timbered on both sides, and easily forded by the stages.

But we must now describe the daughter of the bandit chief.

Nina Noche was a handsome maiden, her face and form molded to perfection.

She was quite dark in complexion, with piercing black eyes, and luxuriant raven hair. She was quick of motion, and very graceful; generally wearing a beautifully-embroidered and beaded suit of buckskin, slashed and fringed, and with hundreds of gold buttons ornamenting it.

Thus attired, and with a costly sombrero, in the band of which was thrust a black plume, the outlaw's daughter presented a pleasing and striking picture.

Long had she lived a wild and lawless life among the most desperate men to be found on the border, and, as the hand of every man, except those of his own band, was against El Negro, his only child considered herself in the same position.

In a small cave, but a short distance from the entrance to the gulch, at the time we have mentioned, Nina and her father sat; she reading, and he smoking, with an air of satisfied indolence. Some time passed thus, when a sound, as if a bar of iron suspended by a rope had been struck by another bar, caused El Negro to call out:

"Come in!"

With a hasty step a man entered, doffing his sombrero, and bowing respectfully to Nina, who looked up in some surprise.

She nodded haughtily.

This man was flashily dressed, and one accustomed to the West would have put him down at once as a "card sharp."

Such, indeed, he was; being one of the gamblers who had fleeced Nugget Nick in Poison Palace.

"Well, Ace High, what's up now in Hard-up?" asked El Negro.

"Nothing alarming, captain. Do you remember, when we were in the bag-slash biz, near Bowlderburg, that you sent a tenderfoot over the range, who tried to draw his 'six' when the order was 'hands up'?"

"Yes, I do recall the circumstance."

"You will remember, then, what followed. Shooting that man was the means of breaking up our band, the Confiscators; for his son, Gold Buttons Bill as they afterward called him, and who had a pard called Nugget Nick, made war on us, and led a crowd to attack us."

"They took you captive, but we rescued you. You met this Gold Buttons Bill at that time, and know what he had sworn to do. You remember all this, captain?"

"Certainly; but why recall it?"

"For a very good reason. Nugget Nick was in Hard-up an hour ago, and one of the boys who was with us at Bowlderburg declares that he saw Gold Buttons Bill, only a few miles down-range, and coming toward the burg."

The outlaw chief sprung from his chair at the first mention of his foe, and stood staring at Ace High.

"The mischief you say!"

"Mischief it is. I'm giving you a straight story, captain, and I don't believe that Big Bowie would mistake any one else for Gold Buttons Bill."

"Deuce take them, I say!" burst out El Negro; "they are regular bloodhounds, and seem bound to give us trouble. But how comes it that these two pards are not together? Nick, you tell me, was in Hard-up an hour ago, and Bill is down-range."

"That's the most singular part of it, captain. Nugget Nick came from San Diego, and got drunk at once. Full Hand and I skinned him clean of his 'dust,' doctored his whisky, and then got up a racket against him with some of the bums, and ran him out of the burg."

"Good for you, Ace High!"

"But," continued the bandit, "as I said, the two are not together. However, when we drove Nick out of town, he rode down-range, and so will probably meet Bill."

"Being afraid of that, I sent two of the boys after Nick with instructions to make an air-hole in his brain-box."

"Good again! Ace High, you've done well. It will never do for those two to meet. If they should, they are certain to find us out between them. They must be attended to at once. If they enter the town together, we must enter the confounded burg at any cost, and shoot them down."

"Big Bowie and his pard may send them both up the flume. I told them to signal by powder-flashes from the big rock, and I would soon be back."

"Very well," said the chief. "Go to the lookout as soon as you get some grub and are rested. Then report the signals to me. Curse that Gold Buttons Bill!"

"What are you afraid of, father?" asked Nina, laughing. "I remember Gold Buttons Bill. He was the handsomest young man I ever saw. It was too bad you shot his father, and so made an enemy of him."

"I only wish he had a dozen fathers, and I'd bore the brains of all of them!"

The face of El Negro was fiendish in expression as he spoke.

His daughter continued:

"I am inclined to think that this redoubtable Bill is advancing into a dangerous section of the country. Upon my word, if he is as good-looking as when I last saw him, I shall be tempted to give him warning."

"You'll not have a chance, Nina," returned her father. "I'll take care of that."

Ace High went out, and full half an hour passed before he again struck the iron bar. El Negro called out:

"Enter!"

The outlaw waited not to be questioned.

He was greatly excited.

"The pards have met on the mountain shelf," he exclaimed. "They are on their way to Hard-up, and Big Bowie has been shot dead! Full Hand signaled as I directed."

The bandit leader burst forth:

"That's all I want to know! I go to Hard-up in disguise, and at once. Take twenty or more of the boys with you, and make a dash into the town at eleven o'clock. Ride right into Poison Palace, and have one of my horses in lead."

"I'll be ready to jump into my saddle, and we'll shoot all who bar our way. There'll be no show to settle those two cusses until you come. You understand, don't you?"

"All right, captain! I'll be there."

Ace High departed.

Nina pleaded with her father not to risk his life thus recklessly.

"There's no danger," he insisted. "You'll admit that when you see my disguise."

In a few minutes, El Negro presented the appearance of a well-to-do miner. The girl was somewhat assured.

"I should hardly know you myself, father," she said, "but still I think it foolish and dangerous, as well as unnecessary, for you to go. You seem to be greatly concerned about the arrival of Gold Buttons Bill at Hard-up. What harm can he and that pard of his do us?"

"It is ridiculous to think he is more than any other man."

"Don't bother me, Nina, and don't fret either. I'm bound to wipe those two fellows out, come what will."

"Remain here until I return. Now I'm off. Take care of yourself."

Nina Noche embraced her father, calling upon all the saints to protect him, and bring him back safe.

He was her one hero, and every woman must have one at the least.

It was plain to see that father and daughter, notwithstanding their criminal and merciless characters, almost worshiped each other.

El Negro was soon off, riding fast until near Hard-up, when he entered the town, leaving his horse staked to grass.

He proceeded at once to Poison Palace, and, ascertaining that no strangers were in the town, he resolved to await the coming of the two pards from up-range, meanwhile filling up the time with Spanish monte.

We have seen what transpired afterward.

The outlaws, had they dashed in at the front door, might have saved their chief; but, from the fact that El Negro had not directed Ace High at which door to enter, he was captured.

Nina Noche, in the mountain cave, slept peacefully, while her father was dragged off to the doom he so richly merited.

Had she dreamed of this, she would have started alone to his rescue, but, as has been recorded, another was working toward that end.

CHAPTER XIII.

A WILD TRAILER.

THE two pards had been very reluctant to leave the point at which they had halted previous to entering Hard-up, for the reason that they knew the Indian youth, who had so suddenly disappeared, was in need of care and attention.

However, they were aware that it was utterly useless for them to search for the Apache boy; for he could evade them, as had been plainly shown by the way in which he had made his escape.

It seemed impossible to them that he could, in his wounded state, have gained the position from which his shot was fired, and which had penetrated a vital spot in the outlaw's body. But they felt that he had fully paid them for their services, although they hoped they would have an opportunity of meeting the young Indian again.

That he was far above the average of his tribe in intelligence, they were positive; for they had both been much with the red-men of the West, and they resolved that when in Hard-up, they would ascertain, if possible, something in regard to him. Afterward, they might seek for him in the mountains, for they did not think he could start for the distant Apache villages for some days.

It had puzzled them to meet him at that distant point, near a settlement, and alone; as he would be shot, as a hostile, by any of the rough element of the mine: who might meet him. Black Eagle, however, was gifted with great fortitude, and besides he was young and strong;

and, although his wounds gave him great pain as he climbed down the precipice, he hesitated not. He was proud of having not only slain an enemy of those who had saved his life, but also of having gained a scalp on his first war-path.

He hated the whites, had been taught to do so ever since his earliest comprehension, but he could appreciate kindness from them, and was not devoid of gratitude.

He had no idea why the two skulkers should have tried to shoot his preservers, but he resolved that he would know. He made up his mind to remain in the vicinity until his wounds, which were not very deep, should heal, and spy about the town below.

It was not only toilsome, but quite dangerous, to descend the steep down which Black Eagle climbed; besides, it was more difficult on account of his wounds and weakness.

Yet he persevered, and eventually discovered the body of his victim. He could hardly suppress an exultant whoop, as he caught sight of it.

Removing the scalp, he examined the revolver in the belt of the bandit, and found it to be uninjured. Very proud was he of becoming the possessor of such a weapon.

He then perceived the huge knife, which had given the dead outlaw his *sobriquet*.

Black Eagle's eyes sparkled.

He forgot his wounds.

Already, in imagination, he could see his father, White Buffalo, placing an eagle-feather in his beaded fillet, while the whole tribe were congregated to witness the ceremony.

That would be the proudest hour of his life.

Suddenly it occurred to the Indian boy, that the comrade of the man he had shot might be near. He examined the place carefully, the moon now shining, and soon came upon the rifle of Big Bowie.

He stood erect, and gazed down the mountainside.

Then he uttered an ejaculation of wonder:

"Waugh!"

And why?

Because he saw, at some little distance from him, a small fire flash, which was soon after re-petaed.

He at once decided that these were caused by igniting gunpowder, and that they were made by the pard of the gigantic white man whom he had shot.

Black Eagle was exultant.

The war-spirit of his people ruled him.

Secreting the rifle of his victim, which he could not well carry, he set out for the point, from which the signals came.

He swept the range, with keen glance, to detect any answering signals.

Soon he came near the lookout, and a short time after perceived the answering signals. The young Apache marked well the point of these. He then stole toward the sentinel, who had been called by Ace High in his report, Full Hand.

The latter was smoking vigorously, and at times casting glances back on the course he had come.

Far better would it have been for Full Hand, had he made an immediate start; for, sly as a creeping panther, Black Eagle was approaching him from the rear. Ere long he reached a position favorable for his object.

Slowly he gained an erect position, and clutched the haft of his murder-cus knife in his right hand. Then, with but a moment's hesitation to gather up all his strength, he sprung forward, caught the bandit, who was totally unconscious of danger, by the hair of the head jerking him backward, and thus having him at the mercy of his knife.

Without a single sound, Full Hand sunk backward, threw up his hands, quivered spasmodically, and then fell at the feet of Black Eagle, a corpse!

Another scalp was hung at the young Apache's belt, and another bowie, rifle, and revolver secured.

The boy shot out the war-cry of his tribe, satisfied that there were no other lurkers within hearing of the sound. Then, secreting the rifle and belt of arms, he stole like a phantom up the range.

But he made slow progress, and when above the town of Hard-up, where he seated himself to rest, and gaze down upon the scene—the glow of the lights in Poison Palace being in plain sight—he heard the rapid firing, the whoops and yells, and saw the dark forms of men, mounted and on foot, and the fiery flashes of revolvers.

Black Eagle was dumfounded.

He could not understand the situation.

It was plain to him, however, that white men were fighting white men.

His conclusion was, that there were two tribes of whites who were at war with each other, one tribe having invaded the hunting-grounds and village of the other, and that he had shot two of the invaders.

From these deductions, he also decided that the two white men, who had saved him from being torn to pieces by the bear, belonged in the town below; as the skulking invaders had sought to kill them.

The Indian youth resolved to keep his position, reasoning that the signals he had seen, in

answer to those of his victim, came from those now below; and that it would be useless to continue on to the point at which he had seen them.

But little time elapsed, when, out from the glare that shone from the rear door of the hotel, rushed the mad mob of miners, dragging the wounded Hyenas.

When these made halt for the purpose of hanging the outlaws, it was at a spot some distance below where Black Eagle had posted himself; and he stole down the mountain-side, and from a covert witnessed the execution. The sight was not such a one as an Indian enjoys.

According to Black Eagle's belief, as taught him by his people, the spirit of no man who had been hanged would ever enter the "happy hunting-grounds," but would wander in eternal darkness, hungry and thirsty, forever.

The young Apache could not bear the sight, so he climbed back, up the mountain-side; and, being weak and sleepy, he gazed about for some time, looking for a secure place, where he would be safe from discovery.

The loss of blood had affected him to a considerable extent, and besides he had suffered greatly in climbing along the mountain.

At length he espied the pine tree on the platform of rock—afterward the place where El Negro was hanged—and, as its thick, dark foliage promised a secure hiding-place, he climbed high up within the branches, fastened himself thereto by the belt he had taken from one of his victims, and was soon fast asleep.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT NEXT?

BLACK EAGLE was destined to be disturbed, however, notwithstanding he had not the remotest idea that such would be the case.

The yells and whoops of the miners, as they brought El Negro up the rocky shelf, awoke the young red-skin, and he unstrapped himself, and descended to within a short distance of the lowermost limbs. Then he realized that it would be impossible for him to reach the foot of the tree without being discovered; and discovery meant death—perhaps the terrible death that had been meted out to the whites further down the mountain-side—the only death an Indian fears.

With a shudder at the thought, the Apache youth made sure that he could not be seen from below, and awaited developments.

He soon saw that the crowd had in charge a captive.

He saw more than that.

He saw Gold Buttons Bill and Nugget Nick, and recognized them as the men who had saved his life.

He then knew, without doubt, that the man they were bringing to the platform had been captured during the fight in the town.

Never in his young life had he deemed it possible that he should find himself in so dread a position.

He watched the entire scene to the end.

It was a terrible sight for that superstitious Indian youth.

He felt that it was "bad medicine" for him to be in the tree at such a time.

This was the awful position of Black Eagle.

He began to think that bad spirits had led him to seek slumber in the pine.

Good spirits, the spirits of his fathers, had controlled events previous to this, and had enabled him to gain two scalps and some valuable plunder; also sending the white men to save him from the bear. But the bad spirits had driven them away, and now ruled the night and his destiny.

The mob left the platform, and Black Eagle was alone with the dead.

He now imagined that evil spirits were whispering in his ears, and were joyous at having increased their number by one—the spirit of the man hanging below.

But it was the whispering of the pine, as the evening breeze played through its needle-like foliage.

However, the Apache boy was destined to be impressed by different emotions, and that quickly; for he beheld, to his great astonishment, a solitary white man rush along the rock, and cut down the suspended body. He felt greatly relieved.

Thus he sat, and watched Professor Pills throughout.

It was soon evident to Black Eagle, that the man who had been hanged was yet alive.

This was startling, but more astonishing scenes were enacted.

The strange man brought a corpse, one of those who had been hanged but a short time before, and proceeded to make an exchange in the clothing of the two. Then, to the young Indian's horror, the dead man was suspended in place of the one who had been cut down.

Black Eagle knew not what to do.

He felt relieved, however, when the doctor cut down the corpse, and hurled it over the ledge of rocks.

Then the professor bore the body of El Negro away, and the time had come for the young red-man to act.

Here, it might be, was another opportunity to serve those who had saved his life.

Thus deciding, Black Eagle quickly descended the tree, and followed Professor Pills, who could, with his heavy burden, proceed but slowly.

He crept on after him, even to the cave, and was in an adjacent dark passage when the bandit chief was laid upon the couch, and arrangements made for his recovery. He saw the entrance to the chamber closed with a stone that swung on a pivot, for the professor carried a light.

After waiting a reasonable time, the red youth stole to the entrance, and succeeded in swinging aside the rock.

He was soon inside the cave.

Had he not been satisfied that the man he had seen hanged was still alive, nothing would have induced him to enter, although he was famishing for food and drink. He found that El Negro was insensible—in fact, in a condition from which he might not recover unless he received the best of care and attention.

He seemed to have been left here to die, alone and unattended.

Undecided what to do in connection with the senseless man, Black Eagle proceeded to break his fast from the plentiful food he found in the cavern. But he touched not the "fire-water of the bad spirit," the curse of his people, which had sent more of them on the long dark trail than the bullets or the long knives of the pale-faces.

His strong desire was to plunge his knife into the heart of the man who lay so near death on the couch, and take his scalp; especially after the thought occurred to him, that he would be doing a favor to his white friends. But the traditions of his people prevented him.

He feared that it would be "bad medicine" to kill a man who was already at death's door. One thing, however, he resolved to do. That was, to prevent the escape of this nearly dead man, should he recover sufficiently to enable him to leave the cavern. He would turn the rock that closed the entrance, and place others against it, thus causing it to be beyond the power of even a strong man to open it from within.

Then a strong desire was born in Black Eagle's breast, that the man might recover; in order that he might deliver him up to the two white men. He believed he should meet the white pards again, indeed he was determined to do so.

The young Apache began by pouring some brandy into the mouth of El Negro, and a copious stream of the same over his head, neck, and breast.

The bandit chief groaned, and rolled from side to side, breathing more naturally; yet there was no light in his black eyes, which were filmy and expressionless.

Yet Black Eagle was persuaded he would live, and was glad.

The Indian youth then left the cave-chamber, taking care that it would be beyond the power of El Negro to make his escape therefrom. Then he hastily strode, his rifle in the hollow of his left arm, from the dark passage, into the comparatively bright open air.

He secured again the arms he had taken from his victims, and walked on until at a point whence he could command a view of the town. There he stood for a full minute, straight as a lance shaft, the butt of his rifle resting upon a rock, and gazed down upon it.

He could not resist a strange fascination, which impelled him to again pass down the mountain-side, and look at the silent, swaying forms, whose spirits, according to his belief, had begun their eternal journey, through the darkness, and suffering privations and torture beyond any that possibly could be inflicted upon them while in the body.

He soon came to a clump of cedars, through which he could peep upon the awful scene; when, for the second time that night, a sound escaped his lips. It was the invariable Indian ejaculation, which may express any one of almost countless emotions:

"Waugh!"

This time, it meant the extreme of astonishment. And why?

Because he saw only a few short pieces of rope hanging from the limbs!

The bodies of the bandits had vanished.

At first Black Eagle believed that the bad spirits had borne them away.

Then he thought of the man who had cut down El Negro, and it seemed only reasonable to suppose he had removed the others also. But for what?

The Indian youth knew that he who had taken the man from the pine, and carried him to the cave, must be the enemy of the two white pards who had saved his life; and that all who had invaded the town were bad white men.

He then reasoned that, as the night prowler of the range, who had made himself so busy undoing the work of the town, had wrought secretly and with great caution, he must be a traitor, a spy, and an enemy to his white friends.

But then, he himself, if captured, was liable

to be suspected. They might believe Black Eagle to be the one who had performed these recent acts; and, if so, they would certainly hang him.

This thought made the young Apache retrace his steps, and as the pine-tree afforded the most secure hiding-place, he again climbed up among its thickest branches, fastened his self as a clog and in a little time was in a deep slumber. His fears of being captured caused him to lose sight of the fact that it was "bad medicine" to sleep in a tree to the limb of which a man had been hanged.

The moon rolled up to the zenith, bright and silvery, the murky haze having cleared away—a few tiny darts of its light penetrating the pine foliage, and playing upon the brooded features of Black Eagle, the young Apache brave, who, in one night, on his first and lone war-trail, had performed deeds worthy an experienced warrior—deeds that would give him the rank of a warrior in his tribe, and the right to wear an eagle-feather in his fillet.

CHAPTER XV.

AFTER THE REPULSE.

ACE HIGH had, agreeably to the orders of El Negro, led such of the Hyenas as could be spared from the stronghold, in the dash into Hard-up. There were a score or more of them, desperate and lawless men, who feared nothing except the deadly noose of Judge Lynch.

They sped directly to the front entrance, Ace High seeing a crowd of men at the bar of Poison Palace; but his chief not being within view, he led the band, as we have seen, between the hotel and an adjacent shanty. This move was a great mistake, as we already know.

After the rout, the bandits who had escaped collected together about half a mile from the town, some of them being seriously wounded. They had no leader, or any one capable of acting as such—Ace High having fallen—and consequently were in a very demoralized state.

They knew not what had become of El Negro, but believed he had been captured.

Under these circumstances, having also lost Ace High, they were at a loss what move to make.

They decided that it would not be advisable to inform Nina Noche, the daughter of their captain, of what had happened—indeed, there was no one in the band who would have dared tell her, as in her fury she would probably shoot the informant dead at their feet.

It was some time before they could come to any conclusion as to what must be done. But one thing was imperative. They must ascertain the truth in regard to their leader.

One of the outlaws produced a greasy pack of cards. It had been agreed that a card should be drawn from the top of the deck by each, and the man who drew the lowest should act as a spy around Hard-up, and find out all that was to be learned in regard to the fate of El Negro.

This was done.

A bandit, known as Four Kings, was, as he thought, the unlucky one.

He felt that he was going to his death, but he hesitated not.

The others proceeded at once up the big gorge to their stronghold; but, before entering, they inquired of the sentinel where the captain's daughter was. All were relieved when informed that she was in her own apartment, and asleep, having given orders that she was not to be disturbed until the arrival of her father.

They remained conversing in low tones, while they awaited the return of Four Kings.

The latter was too prudent to enter the town, even after removing his mask, and assuming as much as possible the look of a miner. He knew that every stranger would be suspected and scrutinized closely. He, therefore, stationed himself between the town and the foot of the range in a secluded spot.

Hardly had the bandit spy put himself in a position that enabled him to gain a view of the rear door of Poison Palace when, to his horror, out from it rushed the vengeful crowd, dragging his comrades who had been captured during the raid. Their intention was obvious.

Four Kings trembled, and crawled to a more sheltered position. There he waited until the mob returned.

He dared not leave the covert.

What could have become of his chief?

The spy was not to remain long in doubt.

Again a yelling mob dashed from the hotel, with two horsemen in their midst. As they approached, Four Kings recognized in one of them, who was bound to the animal he bestrode, none other than El Negro!

He felt that the Hyenas were doomed.

There was no possible way open for a rescue.

Before he could pass half the distance to the cave, even were he not pursued, El Negro would be a dead man. The thought was mad-dening!

It would be the end not only of the captain but of the band.

For himself, naught remained but flight. Four Kings ran, as he had never run before, down the base of the range, and slackened not his speed until he reached the dark-arched passage that led to the retreat of the Hyenas.

Through this he staggered like a drunken man.

Knowing himself safe, a reaction came, and the perspiration ran in streams from his face. The sentinel stared at him in astonishment, but Four Kings heeded him not. He seemed to have become demented. His eyes glared wildly with an insane light and a hunted look.

As the mass of the outlaws congregated in the shadow of an immense boulder, they saw Four Kings approach, and they stared at him in silence. They feared to ask him what news he had brought, for all knew by his appearance and manner that he had the worst of tidings to reveal.

He staggered into the midst of the band and fell prone to the earth.

One of the outlaws gave him some brandy, and others set him up with his back against the rock. They could not endure the suspense long, however. Soon a burly ruffian, bewhiskered to the eyes and armed to the teeth, known in the band as Sequent Flush, burst out impatiently:

"Spit her out, Four Kings! What's up at Hard-up? Hev yer see'd yer gran'marm's ghost, er hev yer jist broke loose from a 'Pache tortur'-stake?"

"Whar in thunder's El Negro?"

Every eye was fixed on the spy with the greatest interest and curiosity.

He raised his head.

Horror was mirrored in his eyes and stamped upon his features.

By an almost superhuman effort he threw off partially the spell that bound him, and sprung excitedly to his feet, crying out in a voice such as none present had ever before heard from him:

"I've see'd wuss sights this night, pard's, than I ever did afore since I su'st trod this hyer ball o' dirt! I've see'd our pards what war captivated strung up ter limbs like dogs!"

"An' thet ain't all, by a long shot, pards. I see'd our chief tied to a horse, an' tuck ter the foot o' the range, with a rope 'round his neck. They hung him ter the lone pine! Ther Hyeners o' Hard-up, ain't ther Hyeners o' Hard-up no longer. Ther burg hes beat us, an' hit runs hitself, an' runs we'-uns, too—runs us up limbs.

"Our cap'n air over the range, an' seven of our pards longer him! We hain't no chief, fer Ace High war shot in ther scrimmage. What we'd better do, is git up an' git down er up ther Grandee afore we're all choked off."

"Yer all hes heerd that El Negro war captain o' the Confiscators, up Bowlderburg way, an' some of our pards war with him thar. Yer hes heerd him tell how ther band war broke up by Gold Buttons Bill an' Nugget Nick, an' he heerd that both o' them cusses war in Hard-up last night, which was ther reason he went in an' ordered ther band ter glido in afterward, ter take them in outer ther dew. He meant biz, every time."

"Wa-al, them two-up-range pards what calls themselves ther 'corralers o' ther crooked,' air in Hard-up. Since ther minnit they struck this locate, ther Hyeners hev commenced ter flip-flop over ther range. Boyces, we can't buck ag'in' them. We've got ter git! Thet's ther verdict o' Four Kings."

During these startling disclosures the bandits stood spellbound.

As the spy ended a round of mad ejaculations and angry threats burst from the band. Four Kings was given another drink.

After a minute or two, Sequent Flush spoke:

"Hyeners! pards o' ther mountings! we'-uns hes heard ther cussedest news we've hearn till yet. Hit jist knocks me blind ter know that El Negro hev passed in his chips. Hit's mighty rough, boyces, an' I can't somehow fatch myself 'roun' ter b'lieve hit's really so."

"Howsomdever, es ter ther way Four Kings takes hit, concludin' we'-uns air plum bu'sted on 'count o' ther cap'n bein' choked off, I doesn't gree with him."

"I 'lows we'-uns ain't goin' fer ter crawfish from Hard-up, ontill we lets 'em know we kin pay 'em, with compound interest, for stringin' up El Negro! 'Sides that, I reckon Nina Noche air liable ter make things hum like a buzz-saw when she knows what's bin did to her dad."

"Four Kings says, we'-uns hain't gut no capt'in. I says, Nina Noche air a chip o' ther ole block, an' caperble o' leadin' we'-uns through anythin', et chain-lightnin' speed at that!"

"Ef she don't make things lively 'roun' Hard-up, I'll strike out fer ther Diggers' reservation, take a ninety-year old squaw, an' locate fer life in a hole in ther groun', like a cussed kiote!"

"Who's ther man what's gut sand enough ter stand up 'fore Nina Noche, an' tell her thot they've hung her dad?" asked one of the outlaws.

"I'll do hit myself," said Sequent Flush. "This hyer biz hes changed me consider'ble. I feels like a dif'runt man, an' I'd jist es leaves run a-muck through that cussed burg, pluggin' Gold Buttons Bill an' Nugget Nick fer keeps, even of I gut bored myself."

"But, pards, Nina Noche 'll bo our queen; I knows hit, an' she'll make things hum. I'll take ther lead, ef yer say so, an' we'll go an' fatch up ther corpus o' El Negro afore we tells Nina."

Let her sleep in peace fer this night. She'll not git much ag'in very soon, I reckon. We'll hev ther Cap's cadaver, ef he air dead!"

"Rah fer Sequent Flush!" called out one of the band, but in a low voice.

A murmur of approbation came from all, and they prepared for their mission at once.

The bandits had been greatly impressed by the words and manner of Sequent Flush, and, had not Nina Noche been at the cave, he would have been chosen chief, without one dissenting voice.

In five minutes more, he led the band, on foot, out from the arched passage, down the great gorge, and toward Hard-up; but kept at the base of the range, the foot-hills and *mottes* shielding them from the view of the citizens as they drew nearer.

Four Kings did not accompany the party. He had seen enough for one night.

He threw himself upon the sward, in the shade of the big boulder, where his pards had awaited his return from Hard-up; and was soon in a deep sleep, regardless of his recent terrible fright and excitement.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DAUGHTER OF THE DEAD.

THE Hyenas, led by Sequent Flush, proceeded at once to the scene of the execution of their chief, El Negro.

Well they knew where that lone pine was located.

When they reached the vicinity of Hard-up, they went more cautiously, taking a quartering course up the side of the range, and keeping themselves screened from observation by the favoring clumps of cacti and cedars.

They moved slowly and silently, like goblins of the night, darting from shadow to shadow across the moonlit spaces. Without a single word being spoken, they climbed over the edge of the rock, and stood upon the natural platform beneath the lone pine, through the foliage of which the night breeze blew gently, causing weird music that was impressive in the extreme.

Many of them were filled with superstitious awe, which was increased when they gazed upward, and perceived the short dangling rope, which bore evidence of having been cut with a sharp knife.

Curses low but deep and vengeful, burst from many brutal lips, as this discovery was made.

All knew, at a glance, that they had not only lost their chief, but even his corpse had been stolen from him.

Black Eagle, the Apache youth, high up among the branches, heard the scraping of heavy boots upon the rocks, and at once freed himself, and descended to a point from which he could view the platform as before. He beheld a number of men—bad white men, as he knew by their brutal and villainous faces.

He knew that none of these men had been present at the hanging, consequently he reasoned that they were the enemies of the town, and of his two white friends. The latter, he was convinced, had many and dangerous foes.

It was with great relief that the Indian boy saw the band start down the rough and rocky steep. But, when they had gone a little distance, they came to a halt. Black Eagle knew that they must have discovered the body of the man which the night prowler had dressed in the clothes of the one who had been hanged.

It was soon apparent that they thought they had found the body of their leader; and they hastened away, bearing it with them.

The little red-skin buckled himself to the limb once more, and soon fell asleep, his last waking thoughts being a hope that he would not again be disturbed.

Sequent Flush, and the main portion of the Hyenas who accompanied him, had been gone from the stronghold about half an hour, when, out from the dark entrance of the bandit cave, and some distance above the grassy vale, slowly came Nina Noche. The girl was rubbing her eyes, and then shading them from the bright moon, while she gazed down into the valley.

She had been worried in regard to the safety of her father when she had fallen asleep, and her dreams had not been the most cheerful. From this cause her slumbers had been shortened, and when she perceived that her sire had not yet returned, she was filled with concern and apprehension.

There were none of the band visible, and she passed out upon the shelf, resolved to learn what had become of them.

As Nina thus stood upon the shelf, she was not long in discovering that all the horses of the band, except four, were staked below in the vale.

This proved to her that they had not returned from their mission.

But where were they? And where was her father?

It was strange, certainly, and the captain's daughter became greatly excited.

The sentinel at the arched entrance had observed her, and had moved back into the shadows, for he did not care to be seen and questioned by the imperious daughter of his chief.

Suddenly, however, Nina observed Four Kings

lying by the boulder and apparently asleep. She knew that he had been with the band led by Ace High, which had been ordered by her father to make a dash into Hard-up, where he would join them, and lead them in a charge into Pison Palace for the purpose of shooting Gold Buttons and his pard.

No sooner did Nina Noche recall this fact, coupling the same with the presence of the horses of nearly the entire band, than she became dizzy from sudden fright. The thought flashed upon her that something dreadful had occurred; and she staggered back against the rock wall.

With a great effort, however, she cast aside these apprehensions, and rushed wildly down to where Four Kings lay sleeping. By this time her ungovernable temper was fully aroused.

It filled her with fury, to see that man thus taking his rest, while her father was absent, and there was every indication that some disaster had overtaken the Hyenas. Near at hand stood a bucket of water, and in her rage, the girl dashed the contents in the face of the sleeping man!

Then she stood, her black eyes flashing into his, as he sprung to his feet quickly as he could have done had he received a blow in the face.

At first, his eyes were blinded by the water. Then before he could see who or what had disturbed him—thoughts of all he witnessed the past night arising in his mind—he started to run, but Nina caught his arm, and cried out:

"Hold, Four Kings! It is I, the daughter of your chief! Why have you been sleeping here, and why are those horses there? Where are the Hyenas? Where is my father?"

"Speak, or I'll do you harm! There's something wrong, and you cannot deceive me. Beware how you trifle with Nina Noche!"

The girl's handsome face had become like that of a Fury.

The sentinel, at the dark entrance, peeped forth, and thanked his lucky stars he was not in the place of his comrade.

The cowardly demeanor of Four Kings increased the anxiety of Nina. Had his life depended upon speaking—and he was by no means sure that it did not—the wretch could not have articulated a word. He stood, pale and trembling, totally unnerved by the dread doings of the night, and this forced interview with his chief's daughter.

She, too, trembled; but it was with furious rage, at the silence of Four Kings.

"Speak, or by the fiends I'll end your power of speech forever!" she fairly hissed, as she drew a revolver.

He gasped, and quivered spasmodically, and had not Nina realized that he was endeavoring, with all his power to address her, she might, in her torturing anxiety, have shot him dead at her feet.

But, what should he tell her?

That now troubled him.

If he informed the girl of the fate of her father he felt sure that she would put a bullet in his brain the next instant. Clearly he must concoct something.

And he did.

"We'-uns made ther dash inter ther burg, Ace High actin' capt'in, an' we couldn't see ther chief at ther front door o' Pison Palace, so we just skuted ter ther hind door. Thar, ther citz made a rush at us, peppering our lay-out lively.

"We'-uns see'd nothin' o' yer dad thar neither. We fought hard, but they sent four hosses ter grass, an' three o' our boyees over ther range, 'sides four what they tuck, Ace High bein' one on 'em.

"That broko us all up, an' we hed ter dust lively, er git bored. We come back hyer, an' ther boyees left tha'r nags, an' went back afoot, ter hunt fer El Negro, on sly scout biz. They left me hyer ter tell yer, but yer war sleepin', an' I daren't wake yer. Then I fell asleep myself, bein' on duty last night too."

"That's all I hes gut ter tell. Hit knocks me blind ter know whar ther chief kin be. I wish ther boyees would come back."

"Whero's my father's horse?"

Nina Noche asked this question, in a voice that seemed to belong to some one else, so unnatural was it.

Four Kings knew that she intended to go to Hard-up, and seek her father; and he was not sorry, for he wished to escape her vengeance, which he knew she would satisfy when she found out he had suppressed the dread truth.

"I'll git ther anermile ef yer wants hit, Miss Nina; but, hedn't yer better wait till ther boyees gits back?"

He knew it would make her more determined, did he advise delay.

"Hurry, I tell you; and keep your advice for some one else!"

Four Kings was only too glad to do so.

He brought up the horse, which Nina led through the dark passage without a word; not noticing the crouching sentinel.

As soon as she entered the big gorge, she sprung lightly into the saddle, caught up the bridle reins, and gave the steed a sharp cut with a raw-hide quirt. Out it sped, from the gulch, and then up the range in the direction of the town.

Four Kings began to breathe freely.

Gold Buttons.

He resolved to collect his traps, and travel; knowing that his life would not be worth a picayune, when Nina Noche returned.

CHAPTER XVII.

A VOW OF VENGEANCE.

THE Hyenas, bearing the body which they believed to be that of their chief, were startled when they beheld Nina Noche, upon the black steed of her father, galloping madly toward them.

Instantly they halted, and stood speechless—the bearers depositing their ghastly burden upon a flat rock.

None had dreamed of the daughter appearing, and none had as yet decided in what manner, or by whom, the fearful truth should be made known to her. Sequent Flush, although he had declared his willingness, decided, after mature thought, that he had assumed a duty which he could not perform.

But the very desperate nature of the situation caused him to resolve that he would do the best he could under the trying circumstances; for, well he knew, all the band were now looking to him.

"Kiver it up quick!" he ordered; and a bandit hastily stripped off his coat, and threw it over the corpse.

Then all stood as they were, awaiting the arrival of Nina.

Up she dashed, at headlong speed.

Her black eyes were fixed, and her teeth set. Her long raven hair was flying wild.

Although but a short distance had been travelled, the horse was flecked with foam. The reins were not stiffened, and some of the band were obliged to spring aside to avoid being trampled upon.

Her keen eye caught sight of the form upon the rock, and her expression was terrible. A single glance showed the girl that her father was not with his men.

They ha'l gone in search of him.

Whose, then, was this body?

Could the bandits have that forlorn look if El Negro was alive?

Nina mentally answered her own question in the negative.

She gazed steadily into the faces of the outlaws, one and all.

Their eyes were fixed upon the ground.

Their appearance spoke as plainly the dread truth, as had the absence of El Negro from the band, and that silent form on the rock. At length she spoke:

"Where is my father, your chief? And what is that, which you have just laid down?"

She pointed with her whip toward the corpse, and all saw that her arm trembled.

Sequent Flush had braced himself, and decided upon the explanation which must satisfy her for the time.

"Hit's one o' the boyees, Miss Nina," he said, "what ther cussed miners strung up, an' then cut him down an' flung him over ther rocks. El Negro war r'arin' mad 'bout Gold Buttons Bill an' Nugget Nick bein' in ther burg, an' he's layin' low fer a shot at 'em. Nobody can't be 'pected ter find him jist yet."

"We-uns thort we see'd him up et ther lone pine, an' skuted fer him, but he lunged inter ther rocks. Mebbe so he wouldn't run from yeou, Miss Nina."

"He's dead sot on gittin' ther drap on ther Up-Range Pards what broke up ther Confiscators; I'm afeard they'll corral an' hang our Cap ef somebody don't git him ter come back ter ther cave. They'd ha' corral'd ther hull o' us, ef we hedn't skuted."

"Ther men o' Hard-up air r'arin', t'arin' mad, an' howlin' fer bleed. They've hung four o' our pards, an' shoted three dead in ther fight. Ther Cap air plum crazy mad, an' they'll dead sure git him, ef somethin' ain't did; that is, ef they ain't corral'd him a'ready."

"We thort we c'u'd glido in afoot, an' do better, but we're goin' fer ther nags, an' tend to make another dash ef ther night holds out long enough. Ef yer glides any furder toward Hard-up, keep cluss, Miss Nina, er they'll gobble yer; an' then we'll be broke up, fer keeps. Ef yer knows them Up-Range Pards, an' kin git dead wood on 'em, plug 'em; fer ther Hyenas ain't safe until they're laid out stiff."

Sequent Flush performed, under the circumstances, a wonderful piece of acting; his gestures and expression being so true to the situation that his comrades were astounded. They were, also, greatly relieved.

Nina had not believed that Four Kings was giving her a straight story, when she awoke him in so rough a manner; but, thus far, she had found his representations true, and she was the more ready to believe Sequent Flush.

It was only reasonable that the Hyenas should have the appearance they had when she came upon them so suddenly, when they had one of their comrades—a victim of lynch law—in their charge. Then, what she had been told was true to the character of her father. All doubt was now banished from the mind of Nina Noche.

"Take your pard's corpse to the cave," she said. "Then jump your nags, and gallop to the pine mette this side of Hard-up! Wait there

until I come for you. I go in search of my father, and must find him!"

"Those pards from up-range I know but too well, and they shall feel my vengeance if they harm, or have harmed El Negro. Travel lively, Hyenas! We'll rule Hard-up, or lay the town in ashes. I swear it—I, Nina Noche, the daughter of the Scourge of the Soledad!"

With these words, she raised her quirt in the air, and brought it down with a hiss upon her steed. The noble beast, startled by the unexpected pain, gave a wild snort, and bounded high in the air. Then, away it shot toward Hard-up, the bridle-reins loose and hanging over the saddle, Nina Noche sitting erect, and gazing toward her destination, as if she could pierce the space with her keen black eyes.

The Hyenas stared after their queen with admiration, mingled with concern, the strange emotions that had controlled them being, for the moment, banished. Soon she was lost to view amid the pine *mottes*, and the bandits looked one at another in strange speculation as to the next move.

"I hed ter give it to her es I did, pards," said Sequent Flush, in an apologetic manner, not devoid of shame. "I tho'rt my pericardium war sheet-iron, but I swar I couldn't look inter her eyes, an' tell her ther straight truth."

"She'd ha' wilted ef I had, er else plugged me with her shooter, an' then lunged et cyclone speed inter Hard-up, an' got tuck, er shot, likely enough. But we-uns must do es she ordered, an' come back on ther nags."

"She'll hev time, I reckon, ter think things over; an' then she'll fergive me fer lyin' 'bout El Negro. I hopes she'll find everything out 'fore we-uns meets her ag'in, fer I swar I doesn't want ter run any more risks."

"How in ther dickens did she find out things war gone wrong?" asked one of the bandits.

"Oh, she's a sharp one! She must ha' see'd ther critters war all thar, an' staked, an' we-uns gone. Then she went fer Four Kings, likely es not, an' he gi'n her some sech lie es I did; ef he hedn't, my gravy'd bin spilled. He war too much skeered ter give her a straight story, an' hit must ha' dove-tailed with mine."

"Come on, pards! I never tho'rt we'd tote ther Cap ter ther cave this-a-way."

Thus the Hyenas resumed their journey toward their stronghold.

We must now follow Nina.

At terrific speed, the daughter of the bandit chief dashed on, in a winding course amid *mottes* and foot-hills, in the direction of Hard-up.

Her mind was in a whirl of excitement; indeed, the thoughts flew so fast through her brain that she had not been really capable of reasoning when Sequent Flush had made his plausible explanation of affairs. She was furious, and at the same time in an agony of apprehension.

Upon reflection, or something approaching to it, Nina began to see that it was scarcely like her father to lurk among the rocks for a chance to shoot an enemy. It would have been more in El Negro's way to charge, at the head of his band into Poison Palace.

She began to doubt the story.

Soon, however, she reached the outer shanties, and halted. Then, with a small bowie, she cut off portions of her saddle blanket, and bound a double thickness of these around each hoof of the horse.

There were no human beings to be seen on the street, and there were no lights in any of the shanties as far as she could see; but a bright blaze shone out from the doors of Poison Palace, from which came boisterous sounds.

The men of Hard-up were evidently making a night of it.

What would Nina Noche have done, or thought, had she known that they were celebrating the hanging of her father, the Scourge of the Soledad Range?

She now walked her horse toward the front entrance of the hostelry, her revolver in hand.

It was impossible for the muffled steps to be heard, especially when the half-intoxicated miners were singing and shouting, and their heavy boots scraping the floor. The girl drew rein, and, bending forward, listened intently.

"Fill up ag'in, pards!" she could hear the landlord yell; "drink wi' Fresh Frank o' Frisco, what war shoted by El Negro, but not fer keeps. Hit's my treat."

"Tumble up, all hands! Gold Buttons Bill an' Nugget Nick, ther boss pards from up-range, hev come ter ther resky o' ther burg, an' made a ten strike ther fu'st night. I'll stay in ther town now fer sartain an' keep up P'ison Palace, fer El Negro'll never raid me ag'in!"

"This hev bin a powerful bad night fer hyeners ter howl 'roun' Hard-up. Fill up, pards! Fresh Frank hev gut a toast. Whar's Professor Pills?"

"Drunk es a b'ilid owl!" yelled a miner.

Nina heard every word.

Why had the landlord boasted that El Negro would never raid the town again?

This was the question that pained her.

But it was lucky she ha'l heard it, for it prepared her for worse words which were to come.

A rattling of glasses followed.

Suddenly the fist of Fresh Frank was brought down with a bang upon the bar, and he yelled:

"Silence, all!"

And silent the crowd became.

"I see yer hev all got yer bug-juice poured out, so I'll gi'n my toast," said the landlord.

"Here's hopin' thet El Negro'll hang whar ye strung him up till we-uns cuts him down, an' thet that 'll never be another Hyener in Hard-up!"

Nina Noche seemed to grow old in an instant. She sat like an equestrian statue, her eyes fixed upon the lighted entrance before her.

Then a desperate look gathered upon her face.

Her small fingers closed in a vice-like grip around her revolver, as she urged her horse away from the door, turning the animal the next moment, and darting like a projectile from a catapult into Poison Palace!

Headlong and with wild snorts the sable steed dashed among the mass of miners, trampling many to the floor. Then came the sharp crack of Nina's revolver.

"Fiends of Hard-up, I'll come again!" she shrieked. "You have hanged my father, and I'll wipe out this burg from the earth!"

"Remember this! Remember well the oath of Nina Noche, the Nemesis, the daughter of El Negro!"

She had halted in the gaming-room to yell these words, and when the last was uttered, she caught sight of Professor Pills, apparently in a drunken slumber.

Bounding up beside him, she clutched his coat-collar, gave a violent jerk, using all her strength, which caused him to fall forward over the front of her saddle, as he had lain upon some barrel-heads.

Then, supporting him as best she could, the furious maiden caused the frantic horse to dart over the floor and out the rear exit. She then sped straight toward the base of the range, in a direct line with the lone pine, which was in plain view high up the mountain-side.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RECKONING WITH HIS HOSTESS.

A MORE astounded party of men there was not in the Southwest, than the miners, gamblers, and bummers of Hard-up, when the young and beautiful bandit queen rode into their midst.

Fresh Frank shot under his bar, with the agility of a panther springing on its prey, and crawled into the darkest recesses among his demijohns; for it had been his words that had caused the furious dash of the daughter of El Negro.

As for Professor Pills, his desire had been, in view of the unfinished task before him, to keep sober; but he dared not refuse to drink, for this might excite suspicion. He had never declined a treat before, and it would seem more than strange to the miners if he did on this occasion.

The consequence was, that the doctor was soon helplessly drunk; and the "boys" had had their own fun with him, before he succumbed to his old enemy.

Gold Buttons Bill and Nugget Nick were standing side by side, in conversation; and were, consequently, taken more by surprise than the others, if indeed that were possible.

Had the intruder been a man, they would have jerked revolvers at once; but they did not, for an instant, entertain a thought of so doing, after their first glance at the maiden. The sight almost paralyzed them, notwithstanding all they had seen and heard of Nina Noche at Boulderburg.

So dumfounded were they, that they made not a movement to effect her capture.

Nina blazed away, here and there, into the crowd, without taking any aim. Some were wounded, but not seriously; indeed the horse injured as many as did the bullets, and these would have been quite serious had not the hoofs been blanketed.

Outlaw though she was, and desperate, none could help feeling pity for the girl.

Not until she made that mad dash into Poison Palace, did those rough men realize the extent of misery they had heaped on her head. She had loved her father, and she had been brought up from childhood amid associations in which she probably saw little that did not seem to her justifiable.

A white boy, captured and reared by Indians, they knew would be an Indian in everything except the color of the skin. Nina Noche's training had made her what she was.

They felt the more kindly toward her from the fact that there was not a female in the town, nor within leagues.

Had she been less young and attractive, and had she killed one of their number, they might not have been so charitably disposed toward her. As it was, there was more pity than indignation.

Their surprise had been great when Nina first dashed in, but when she urged her horse up beside the barrels, caught up Professor Pills, and then sped out into the night with her captive, disappearing among the pines near the range, then indeed were they bewildered.

This last act was unaccountable.

She could not possibly think that the doctor

had been instrumental in lynching her father. Indeed his condition would, of itself, almost prove this to have been impossible. Besides, he had not been really sober in months.

The men of Hard-up had not time to think or reason, before the girl and her captive had disappeared.

Then Bill and Nick rushed at once to attend to those who had been injured.

Not a soul thought of following the daughter.

Fresh Frank knew the terrible female had departed, and he was filled with shame and humiliation at having so publicly displayed his extreme and uncalled for cowardice. He crawled stealthily from his hiding-place, and managed to gain an erect position behind his bar, where he began hastily to arrange the decanters. At this time, no one noticed him. All eyes were fixed upon Gold Buttons Bill, who was waiting upon a wounded miner.

Soon the landlord was called upon to furnish more liquor, and it seemed doubtful if any one gave him another thought.

He was rejoiced that they did not.

He also congratulated himself upon having been so prompt and prudent, for he doubted not that the female bandit would have made him her special target.

The toast of Fresh Frank had left no room for doubt in the mind of Nina Noche, as to the fate of her father; yet her words implied, when she addressed herself to the men of Hard-up, that she was not sure he had met an ignominious doom at the end of a rope.

The truth was, she was most unwilling to believe it.

She was hoping against hope that the landlord had lied, or had spoken in jest.

She had not caught a sight of Professor Pills until she was about to dash from Poison Palace. Then she recognized the doctor as a spy and friend of her father; once a noted and well-to-do physician at Bowlderburg, of whom rum had been the ruin. On the instant she decided that he could tell her everything in regard to her father's fate, and she resolved to bear him away and, if necessary, force the truth from him.

Nina urged her horse at full speed toward the base of the range, and upon reaching it halted at a small spring that was hidden from view by willows.

Dashing through these she allowed the professor to slide from the horse to the ground, his head falling into the water, though his mouth and nose were not submerged. She then allowed the steed to drink sparingly, when she dismounted and secured him in a *motte* near at hand.

Then she reloaded her revolver, and when this was done Professor Pills was striving to draw himself from the water by grasping the branches of the willows.

When she stood before him, he fixed his bloodshot and almost expressionless eyes upon her.

For a moment he gazed at her. Then he strove to cry out, but only a gurgling in the throat was the result.

His bloated face became ghastly, his eyes bulged from their watery sockets, and his whole frame trembled as though he had been suddenly stricken with ague.

It was evident to Nina that the degraded doctor believed her to be an apparition, and was terrified accordingly; and she was in no mood for allowing him to cause her delay through his superstitious fright or otherwise.

She said, quickly:

"Crawl out from that spring, doctor, and at once! I know you, and you know me. Out, I say!"

"Get upon your feet, or I'll end your career of whisky-drinking!"

She leveled her revolver.

The doctor evidently thought he had struck a strange ghost—one who threatened to make a ghost of him.

His demoralized brain was unable to grasp or retain a thought but a flitting moment, when another and then another flashed through it—all strange, absurd, or horrible beyond measure.

He had not the remotest idea where he was, where he had been, or in what manner he had come to be in his present position. The slightest sound was increased tenfold, and a panoramic array of frightful pictures darted through his mind, Nina Noche being the central figure in each.

He was conscious, however, that he was in danger of being shot unless he obeyed the vision, let it be what it might.

The form and face were those of the daughter of El Negro, and this recalled all the fearful experiences of the night.

He began to fear that his end had come.

His one thought was that Nina Noche would kill him for not having repaired to the cave and informed her of the fate of her father. How much the girl knew in regard to the doings of the night, he of course could not tell.

But he had no time to advise with himself.

Nina had no time to lose.

Professor Pills struggled violently and desperately, and soon stood erect but trembling before the bandit's daughter.

Her face was a study.

Again she addressed him.

"Come! start, I say, and lively, up to that lone pine! By the time you reach it, you'll be able to talk, and talk you will, this night, or I'll take care you'll be speechless forever!"

"When Nina Noche speaks, her words are no mere empty threats. Start, and I will follow you. If you attempt to escape I'll shoot you like a dog!"

It must have taxed the maiden's self-control to the utmost to refrain from asking the doctor about her father; but she could see that Professor Pills was really incapable of speaking connectedly or sensibly, and she wanted a correct and straightforward explanation of all that had occurred.

The miserable being tottered through the willows, Nina close at his heels, and, after falling to the earth a couple of times, he reached the base of the range. Then he began to crawl up the rough and rocky way toward the lone pine, beneath which he had that night been the principal actor in strange and horrible scenes.

He crawled upon hands and knees, not daring to trust himself to an upright position, lest he should fall backward over the steep ledge.

The watchful young woman followed after, revolver in hand,

Yet she did not keep her eyes fastened continually upon the doctor, for much of the time her gaze was fixed upon the dark foliage of the lone pine. But every step she took upward caused her to have less hope.

It was a slow and toilsome trip to both, and especially to the wretched doctor.

While it lasted, however, he was able in some slight degree, to collect his thoughts.

He knew, from the words and actions of Nina, that she was seeking her father's corpse; for she would not be on the mountain in the small hours of the morning, had she not learned something of what had befallen him.

For himself, he was in a dreadful position.

He dared not inform the daughter of the fact that he had cut down her father after he had been hanged by the men of Hard-up; for then he would be forced by Nina to guide her to the cave to which he had carried El Negro, there, perhaps, to find the outlaw chief a corpse!

In such a case, she would undoubtedly vent her fury upon him.

Professor Pills could not doubt that this would be his fate in such an event.

Indeed, in such a condition was the brain of the miserable man, that he could not for the life of him remember whether El Negro had showed signs of recovery at the cavern or not.

Consequently he made up his mind not to reveal any of the circumstances connected with his efforts to revive the bandit chief. He would say nothing, even of having seen him.

He would, in short, pretend ignorance of the whole affair, and in excuse for not having exerted himself to save his old friend and patron, he would plead intoxication. Even then he feared the vengeance of Nina; for she knew that he had been placed in Hard-up by her father expressly to look out for his interests, and to effect his release if captured by the citizens.

He had been instructed also, and of this, too, she might be aware, to cut El Negro down and revive him should he be lynched.

Such thoughts flashed through the tortured brain of the professor, as he crawled up the rocks, the daughter of the bandit chief, with pistol in hand, following him.

Truly, Professor Pills was in no enviable position.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE APACHE ON THE ALERT.

It was a strange sight, that of the doctor crawling up the rocks in a trembling and hesitating manner, below the platform of rock; and that tall lone pine, with the beautiful girl, her long hair hanging free, and her wild eyes fixed upon the branches, upon one of which she believed her father had met his doom!

She brought all her strength to the front, to bear up under the fearful strain, and sought to catch a view of the space between the platform and the limbs, from which, if there, she must see suspended the form of El Negro. Her eyes started from their sockets, her lips parted, and her teeth rattled together like castanets; for she saw a straight line, depending from one of the lower branches, plainly marked against the moon-illumined rocks beyond.

That line, she knew, was a rope!

The girl tottered for a moment, but a strange fascination drew her on, and strength was given her to proceed.

Professor Pills, too, kept on. Great beads of perspiration were standing upon his bloated face. His hair was tangled, his clothing was torn and ragged, and his face and hands badly soiled. In short, he was a pitiable sight to behold.

He was recalling his previous visit, and in his imagination the same awful scene was reproduced. He was now persuaded, that all he had actually accomplished was but one of the many dread dreams that had visited him in his drunken slumbers.

He could but congratulate himself upon hav-

ing decided not to inform Nina Noche that he had saved her father's life; for, had he led her to the secret cave, El Negro would not have been there, and she would surely have slain him.

Nina halted in her tracks, the moment she perceived that the hanging rope had been cut.

It was strong evidence, if not conclusive that some one had met a horrible death; and the words Fresh Frank had spoken in his toast were sufficient proof that her father had met his death at the hands of the men of Hard-up, the pards from up-range having been the prime movers in the lynching. She had, for some time lost hope of ever again meeting her father.—all hope that he lived—and the sight before her confirmed her worst fears.

The wretched girl stood, as if transformed to stone. She could not move hand or foot, much less cry out.

The doctor had fallen face downward, and covered with his hands; but a horrible fascination, which he could not resist, drew his head slowly around to one side. To his great astonishment, he saw nothing but the short swaying rope.

The body of the bandit chief had been cut down!

But as he raised his eyes still further, he beheld another and a most startling vision.

This was the head and painted face of an Indian, whose long black hair mingled with the needle-like foliage of the pine.

He was terrified nearly to death!

He forgot that Nina Noche had forced him up the mountain-side, and that she was near at hand. He crawled as fast as his shaky limbs would permit to the north edge of the platform. Quickly he crept over and disappeared.

Secure from observation, in a dark and tangled thicket, Professor Pills lay trembling and sick as death. Indeed, he prayed for death to relieve his agony of mind and body. And yet, he had no idea that the apparition he had seen among the pine branches was flesh and blood, but believed it had been a vision of his imagination—one of many that he was doomed to see—and, as he had certainly been awake, he felt sure that he was about to become the victim of *mania a potu*.

Black Eagle had been scarcely less startled. So strange had it appeared to him to discover a man crawling upon that platform, that he had lowered his head within view and scorned to dodge back when he saw the eyes of the newcomer fixed upon him.

The lips of the red youth curled in scorn, as he saw Professor Pills creep away in abject terror, and he then recognized in him the person whom he had seen cut down the man who had been hanged.

Hardly had the professor ensconced himself in the thorny thicket when Nina Noche sprung upon the rock. The young Apache drew himself quickly above the screen of foliage, but not so far as to prevent him from peeping downward.

To say that he was astonished would be false, for he had seen so many unexpected and inexplicable sights in a few hours' time that nothing which could possibly happen would have given him more than a momentary surprise.

He was deeply impressed, however, by the sight of that young and striking-looking maiden in such a place and at such an hour. The sight of her reminded the Indian boy of the fair captives his father, when on raids into Mexico, had brought back to the village.

That which most impressed him, however, was the vengeful look upon her face.

She still held her revolver tightly clutched, and she gazed at the severed lariat.

Black Eagle knew at once that the man who had been hanged there must have been very dear to the white maiden; for she looked, with murderous fury, down upon the town, and shook her clinched fist threateningly toward it.

The man, he felt assured must have been a great chief among the bad whites.

The young Apache concluded that he now held a great and valuable secret in his power—a knowledge of the whereabouts of the missing man, who was doubtless still alive—a secret known only to that crawling coward and himself.

But, from the fact that the white pards who had saved his life were enemies of the bad chief, Black Eagle resolved that they and none others, should know of the occupant of the secret cave.

The pusillanimous professor was in the thicket, too weak and terrified to go to the cave for some time to come, as the young red-skin knew; and the latter decided that he would again go there himself, and ascertain the condition of the man who was seemingly of so much importance to so many.

Nina Noche stood in the shade of the lone pine; all around, above, below, and over the far stretching plain, the silvery moon casting its soft and mellow light, and revealing plainly every shanty and wicky-up in Hard-up.

She started down upon the scene, and her eyes took on a more malignant expression when she beheld the forms of two men, standing in the bright moonlight, and but a few paces from the rear door of Poison Palace.

The clothing of one was glittering with bright buttons, and his attire generally was light; the other had on a red shirt, and, like his companion a wide brimmed sombrero. They had arms in their belts, and one of them held a silver night-glass to his eyes, which reflected the rays of the moon.

It was no wonder that the expression upon Nina's face was fiendish in the extreme, for she knew she was gazing down upon the two pards from up-range, Gold Buttons Bill and Nugget Nick, whom she considered the murderers of her father!

She knew that Gold Buttons Bill, the gayly-attired corraller of the crooked, as some called him, was looking through the glass directly at herself.

He had broken up the Confiscators, when her father was the chief of that band, a year previous, near Bowlderburg, afar up the rocky range; and he had now traced what remained of them to Hard-up, in one night succeeding in fulfilling his vow of vengeance.

Nina knew that her father had killed the father of Gold Buttons Bill, but she did not take that fact into consideration, so furious was she at the time. Perhaps the day would come when she would.

Gold Buttons Bill had taken an oath over his father's corpse, to have the life of his slayer, El Negro. But this did not occur to the bandit's daughter, in her anguish and thirst for revenge.

She sprung to the outer edge of the platform, in the bright moonlight, full in the view of the pards from up-range, through the glass which was changed from one to the other.

CHAPTER XX.

HEADING THE FORLORN HOPE.

NINA NOCHE stood, revolver in one hand, the other clinched, gesticulating furiously toward the two men who stood below, in the rear of Poison Palace.

Black Eagle, from his covert in the pine, saw his white friends, and saw also the beautiful maiden as she thus threatened them.

No word left Nina's lips.

Soon Gold Buttons Bill and Nugget Nick vanished into the hotel, as if they could not endure longer to watch the vengeful girl. She saw this, and again she sent piercing glances over the platform of rock, and around the same; walking with hasty step along the edge, and examining the adjoining thickets and the rocky clefts below.

For the first time, it seemed, she missed the presence of Professor Pills.

At length she reached the north side of the shelf, when she suddenly halted; her eyes filled with horror, as she gazed downward.

Why?

Detached pieces of clothing clung to the jagged rocks and cacti.

Her father, she was already persuaded, had fallen a victim to the vengeance of the mob.

He had been cut down.

That much was evident.

But, by whom?

Certainly by some one who hated him.

And why?

Because his body had been hurled down the steep mountain-side.

These fluttering rags were convincing proofs of this.

But he no longer lay there. Of that she was confident.

She had no longer the slightest doubt that the burden carried by her father's followers, when she rode up to them, was all that now remained of him.

Four Kings had deceived her, through dread of her fury; and Sequent Flush had also invented a story, sending her to the lone pine, that the fate of her father might gradually become known to her.

And, she admitted, they had good reason for so acting. She really believing that, had the terrible truth come upon her thus suddenly, she would have been driven mad. She could not be angry with them. They had done as they did, in all kindness. They had proved that they felt great pity and sympathy for her.

Upon them she depended greatly to help her avenge her father and their comrades. They would, doubtless, be as eager for vengeance as herself; or, at least, in comparison to the loss they had met with.

Then she recalled the fact, that she had ordered the Hyenas to return with their horses, and await her in the dark shades of the pine *motte*.

As she moved away from the spot, it chanced that he passed quite near the covert of Professor Pills; and the sound of her steps and fluttering garments caused the very hair on the poor wretch's head to seem as squirming snakes. But she passed on without discovering the doctor in his drunken delirium.

Nina glanced down the side of the range, but saw no moving form; and, at once, made her way, as speedily as the nature of the ground would allow, to the place where she had left her horse—the noble black steed of her father—upon

which he had dashed in many a dangerous raid. The animal gave a low neigh, as its mistress entered the *motte*.

She at once sprung into the saddle, and slowly, keeping trees and rocks between herself and the town, made her winding way toward the pine *motte*, in which she had bade the Hyenas meet her.

In the center of this there were but few trees, and these had but few lower branches; indeed horsemen could ride, without inconvenience, beneath them.

Through the outer, thick wall of verdure, Nina Noche urged her steed, and burst into the middle portion of the *motte*.

There, each standing with his right arm over his horse's neck, was the remnant of her father's band!

They were in a most miserable state of mind, from having been forced to deceive their future leader, and greatly puzzled in regard to the reception she would give them; for, they felt sure she must have gained some knowledge of the sad truth, in connection with her father's absence.

"Hyenas!" cried out the young Bandit Queen in a clear voice; "I know all!"

"Four Kings deceived me, and Sequent Flush so did you, but I have had time to think, and see why this was done. You did right. I forgive, indeed I thank you for the consideration you showed. To have heard the truth then, would have overwhelmed me.

"Hyenas, Nina Noche has visited the lone pine. You know what that means. She has been in Hard-up, and dashed through Poison Palace, emptying her revolver as the black steed of her father trampled his murderers to the floor!"

Regardless of their being in the near vicinity of the town, the bandits burst out in one simultaneous cheer.

Their wonder was to be increased, however, as the girl continued:

"Hyenas! The demons of Hard-up know now that the daughter is of the same stamp as her sire. After emptying my revolver, I caught up Professor Pills, who lay there in a drunken stupor, across my saddle pommel, and carried him from the hotel.

"None followed me. I forced the doctor, who, you all know, was my father's tool and spy, to crawl up the mountain-side to the lone pine; but, when I was overcome by what I saw, he escaped me.

"I intended to compel him to relate all that he had witnessed, and to tell why he did not make an effort to rescue your captain, for which purpose he had been placed in Hard-up. I would have forced him to this, or shot him at my feet!

"When I perceived that the rope had been cut, and saw rags on the jagged rocks, then I knew that my father had been cut down, and thrown over the steep mountain-side. But I knew, at the same time, that the corpse you were bearing to the cave, and which you were so averse to having me see, was that of my father.

"I have nerved myself to bear this. It would drive me insane, but for the one all-ruling object in my mind. That object, you can all easily guess.

"It is"—raising her voice, and with all the air and manner of a female Fury—"revenge!

"Hard-up shall lie in ashes, and those who hanged my father shall die by the bullet, or the rope! The pards from up-range, who followed him for revenge—those who, at Bowlderburg, broke up the Confiscators, some of whom are still in the Hyenas—shall die the death of dogs!

"But Gold Buttons and his comrade must be taken alive. They shall be made to curse the day that they were born. I swear it, and they know what they have to expect from me!"

"Hurrah fer Nina Noche, Queen o' the Hyenas!"

This, though in a prudent key, came from every lip.

"Thanks, Hyenas! I'll lead you to vengeance. The pards from up-range have seen me to-night. They looked through a glass, and saw me at the lone pine, but shame prevented them from acting against her they had so terribly wronged.

"Henceforth I am Nina Noche, the Nemesis, Queen of the Hyenas.

"Come! Follow me! We return to our stronghold, but to-morrow night Hard-up shall see sights."

With these words, Nina urged her horse out from the *motte*.

There was a tremendous crashing of bushes, then a clattering of hoofs over the rocky course; and the outlaws, with murmurs of admiration, swept at full speed down the range, toward the big gulch.

In fifteen minutes more, their horses were again staked in the vale, the bandits preparing food, and Nina kneeling beside a bench in the cave, upon which was a still and silent form.

Tears relieved her overtaxed brain, and convulsive sobs racked her frame.

She had, with the fortitude of an Indian, borne her great grief and anguish, until she beheld that blanket-covered form which she be-

lieved to be her father's mangled body. Then, at last, she had broken down; unable to bear up longer against the avalanche of woe and despair that had, in a few brief hours, been hurled upon her.

CHAPTER XXI.

A SOUND OF REVELRY BY NIGHT.

WHEN the crowd returned from the range to Poison Palace, they found no one within view, and were surprised at the disappearance of Fresh Frank and Professor Pills, at first thinking that the Hyenas had really returned and carried the two men away.

But, a second thought decided them that this was absurd, for the bar-room presented its usual appearance. Upon examination, they discovered the barrel beneath which the landlord had ensconced himself, and one of the miners seated himself upon it.

Gold Buttons Bill appointed himself barkeeper *pro tem*, and in a little time everything was lively. Fresh Frank, who had instinctively drawn away from the bung-hole, believing, and with good reason, that the Hyenas had taken possession of his hotel, now began to think his property in danger. But that was as nothing in comparison with his personal safety.

He trembled in abject terror, although there was little space for such a performance. The perspiration stood upon his forehead, and he strove in vain to think of some fervent petition that might avail him.

When the miner seated himself upon the barrel it tipped slightly. This caused the landlord's hair to start upward, but there was no room for it to stand on end.

The cramped position he was in gave him great torture; and thus suffering, both physically and mentally, Fresh Frank awaited what he fully believed would be a general smash-up before the supposed Hyenas departed. But a great change was destined to come over the spirit of his dream. It was about to become rose-tinted, in place of black and threatening.

The bar had been so crowded, that the man who had seated himself upon the barrel had no chance to get his drink, and, where did appear a vacant space, he, being intensely eager to quench his thirst, sprung quickly from his seat to the floor. This overturned the barrel, from which Frank's lower limbs protruded, thrashing the floor, while he sent out shrieks of terror.

Before any one in the crowd could speak, one quick-witted fellow caught up a blanket and threw it over the luckless landlord, not giving an opportunity of recognizing the men of the town. Out they hauled him, his head being completely enveloped in the thick cloth.

"Shet up!" yelled one of his captors, "or ye're a dead whisk-slinger!"

Tremblingly Fresh Frank complied with the order.

Gold Buttons had been quite serious, and uncommunicative since the lynching, but he could not refrain from hearty laughter at the comical position of the landlord.

"Dang me," declared Nugget Nick, "ef this hyer ain't their liveliest night fer circuses, an' pic-nics I ever knowed!"

"That's enough, pards," suggested Bill. "Let up on him!"

Bill's word was law with the miners.

At once they jerked the blanket from Fresh Frank's head.

He stared at them, open-mouthed.

The roars of laughter that greeted him were indescribable.

After fully realizing his position, the valiant Frank would have gladly crawled into a coyote hole, had such an opening presented itself. He was greatly humiliated, more indeed than ever previously; and he could have given every cent he was worth, could have given any creditable explanation that would have been at all plausible.

But he could say nothing.

He did, however, the best thing under the circumstances.

He sprung behind his bar, and "set 'em up!"

This act spoke louder than words.

Gold Buttons called out:

"Fresh Frank treats, pards of Hard-up, and we'll drink with him, and then organize our force. We shall hear from the Hyenas, probably, before morning, and not be obliged to listen either. It will be strange if they do not make a bold dash for revenge."

"This has been a disastrous night for them so far, but luck may change, and Hard-up be the sufferer. If there is not a break made to-night, it will come to-morrow night, we may be certain."

"Here we are, all filled up! Frank, you are to take four singers this trip, to brace your nerves; for Poison Palace is liable to be assaulted at any time."

"I'm fixed, pard Bill," returned the humiliated host. "I don't take big drinks, but pour down often."

"Dog-gone my duckets!" exclaimed Nick; "ef I ain't gittin' too shaky on my pins ter take a hefty snifter o' whisk! I'm touchin' my liquids light, bovees."

"Here's confusion, disaster, and death, to the Hyenas!" called out Gold Buttons Bill.

The crowd gave a cheer, and then drank the toast.

All of them, acting on a miner's suggestion, then adjourned to the gaming-room, and held a meeting, over which Bill presided.

The latter was elected sheriff and general boss of the burg, Nick deputy, and a programme of defense agreed upon. Then all returned to the bar; the landlord not more jubilant over the result of the meeting, than he was at escaping the ridicule he had expected.

Not until then did he miss the doctor.

"Whar's Professor Pills?" he inquired.

"He warn't with us," said one. "Le's hunt him."

The result was that the doctor was found under the table, where he had crawled on his return from the cave. He was in a most miserable plight, and terrified beyond measure, when they dragged him out.

They dosed him, again and again, with whisky, and then placed him on the barrel-heads, off which he was afterward picked by Nina Noche.

It was not long after this, that the daring dash of the bandit Queen was made into Poison Palace, which, for the time, rendered them incapable of speech or action.

When it was over, they could not but admire her for the deed. Even those who had been injured by her horse, and wounded by her revolver-shots, soon stopped their complaints, and subsided into silence; condemning themselves for fools, in not having gotten out of her way.

The injured were attended to, Bill acting as amateur surgeon, in place of Professor Pills; but, as no very serious wounds had been inflicted, he performed the service without difficulty. Then all lay down, Bill and Nick volunteering as guards.

Thus it was that Nina, from her position beneath the lone pine, had seen no one in the town below except the two pards, who watched the scene on the platform until the doctor had escaped, and hidden himself.

They were, consequently, greatly puzzled as to what had become of him, and also as to the bandit's daughter in taking the inebriate away, at such great risk, and with no little trouble.

One thing was certain. She was a maiden of remarkable nerve and reckless bravery, who would, if the Hyenas remained true to her, cause much trouble and bloodshed.

A closer inspection of the scene up the mountain-side showed, that the corpse of El Negro was no longer suspended to the lone pine.

Gold Buttons Bill then turned his glass to the other trees. The dead bandits had all disappeared.

It was unreasonable to suppose that Nina Noche could have cut down the bodies, and it was impossible for her to have removed them. It must be that they, as well as that of El Negro, had been taken away previous to the girl's arrival.

All this was strange.

When the Up-Rango Pards, themselves screened from view, beheld the outlaw queen descend the steep, mount her black steed and gallop away, they were satisfied that she had not seen her father's corpse—that it had been carried away previous to her coming.

Both at once started in the direction taken by Nina, and soon saw her enter the pine *motte*. They followed her in the stealthiest manner possible, eventually crawling into the dense shrubbery bordering the clump of trees, and were in time to hear her oath of vengeance against the town and all within it.

They knew that the Hyenas would fight to the death for their queen, and that Hard-up was in extreme danger.

The pards heard nothing spoken, however, in regard to what had become of El Negro; and, after the departure of the bandits for their stronghold, they started up the range on a tour of investigation.

CHAPTER XXII.

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.

THE gray streaks in the eastern sky, seen between the serrated peaks high above their heads, heralded to Gold Buttons and Nugget Nick the coming of another day, as they were making their way from the *motte* after the departure of the bandits and their queen.

They had no fears as to the safety of the men of Hard-up, then sleeping upon the floor of Poison Palace, for the Hyenas, they knew, had departed for their stronghold, and the town and its people would be free from molestation until night again cast her mantle over them.

But before reaching the base of the range, at a point directly below the lone pine, they were brought to a sudden halt by a series of shrieks and outcries that denoted the extreme of fear and horror.

These totally unexpected and unaccountable sounds proceeded from up the mountain-side, and quickly casting their gaze in that direction, they located them near the lone pine. That their sense of hearing had not deceived them they soon had proof, for as they gazed in wonder, they beheld none other than Professor Pills.

He was climbing frantically upon the rock platform on the north end of the same, and still continuing his cries.

The next minute he sprung to his feet like a jumping-jack and caught at the hanging lariat, which seemed to have some fearful fascination for him.

They could not, of course, see the expression of his face, and only the outline of his form, which was not to be mistaken for another; but well they knew that the unfortunate slave of drink was now suffering from *delirium tremens*.

Were they to advance up the range he would be shut out from their view entirely, and hence they kept their position, filled with concern and pity for the wretched doctor but dreaming not that he would seriously injure himself. He had, it was evident, fled from some imaginary danger—something that existed only in his disordered imagination.

They were doomed, nevertheless, to be greatly astonished, for as they watched the maniac, they beheld him spring like a panther to the trunk of the giant tree and climb rapidly upward, as if nerved, of a sudden, with new agility and strength.

This act, however, did not cause them to be greatly concerned. They were merely amazed and perplexed in regard to the intentions of the miserable being.

Professor Pills quickly reached the lowermost of the larger limbs, over which the severed rope hung. He crawled out upon it, and, reaching down, drew up the lariat quickly, tying a noose and placing the same over his head!

Then with a terrific shriek the would-be suicide slid off from the limb, clutching the rope, and lowered himself hand over hand until there were but a few inches of space between them and the knot.

The two men stared in horror at the awful sight, but they knew that before they could climb half the distance the luckless professor would be a dead man, for it would be next to an impossibility for him to regain the limb, as his strength would not hold out. His clutch would give way, and then he would die an awful death by his own hand!

It seemed an age to the watchers that the doctor thus hung by the hands, but it was in reality not more than a minute; then the unfortunate being seemed for the first time to comprehend his awful situation—to realize that he was near his end!

He was probably more sober at that moment than he had been for years.

Just then, directly above his head and not six feet distant, the painted face of Black Eagle was thrust through the foliage, his long hair falling down on either side of it.

The black eyes of the Apache boy stared, with superstitious awe, into the face of the doomed doctor, for it was beyond his power of comprehension to understand why a white man should doom himself to a death which would condemn his spirit to wander forever through darkness and desolation, suffered, but once in twelve moons, to gaze in at the happy hunting-grounds, where the grass is ever green, the rivers never run dry, game is plentiful, and the mustangs fleet as the wind.

For an instant only did Professor Pills gaze upward at that wild face, which he now for the second time beheld, and yet believed was a vision of his disordered brain.

Did he prefer death to such suffering?

Did he begin to comprehend, at that last moment, that the face so hideous was real flesh and blood?

This is a mystery known to none—not even to himself in after days.

He gave out a cry, so horrible and unearthly that the Indian youth sprung, in superstitious fright, further up among the branches of the pine.

As the wretched man shrieked, his grip relaxed, and his fingers slipped along the rope.

Gold Buttons Bill and his comrade rushed frantically up the mountain-side, although it was absurd for them to suppose they could reach the lone pine in time to cut down the professor before life was extinct. But they could not, for their lives, have remained inactive.

Black Eagle had known, from the first appearance of the doctor, that he it was who had removed the body of the man who had been hanged by the miners. He knew that that man, now in the secret cave, was of vast importance to many; that he was a great chief among his people, who, he felt assured, were bad whites, and enemies to the men of the town.

Again had the slumbers of the Indian youth been broken. Again he was impressed with the thought that the spirits of his fathers were not only guarding him, but keeping him informed of much that would be of great importance to him; that might be the means of giving him more renown and rank than even the scalps which hung at his belt.

He had decided long since, that the doctor was not in his right mind; that the hand of the Bad Spirit had been laid upon him, and therefore no red-man must harm him.

The young Apache knew that his preservers were at the base of the range, and he had no de-

sire to be discovered by them. He could watch the demented white man no longer.

He resolved that he would have no "bad medicine on his trail" through the madman's presence.

Down darted Black Eagle to the limb over which the rope hung, and drew his sharp scalping-knife across the taut and weighted lariat.

The rope parted, and Professor Pills fell in a heap, upon the rock platform!

The agile Indian youth was down the tree in an instant, and, springing to the doctor's side, loosened the noose. He then glided swiftly across the platform, to its north end.

Jumping to a rock below, and thence to a shelf, he ran like a deer toward the secret cave, bounding over rocks and clumps of cacti; but at length halted, seeking covert in a thicket; from which he could gain a view of the lone pine and the platform.

Soon after Gold Buttons Bill and Nugget Nick sprung upon the level rock, and ran to the side of the prostrate man.

To their astonishment, they found the noose was slack.

They gazed around, scrutinizing thickets and boulders.

Then, at an order from his comrade, Nick climbed the trees.

Nugget Nick descended, and the two pards spoke together, and gesticulated wildly.

They had apparently thought, when they saw the professor upon the platform, that the rope had accidentally parted; but they found not only the noose loosened, but the lariat cut with a keen knife.

They could discover no trace of the presence of the person who had saved the doctor's life. The prairie pards were puzzled.

But they wasted little time in search or thought. All their efforts were now directed to the wretched man's recovery.

Certainly he was no good to himself, nor to any one else. He was a poor miserable being, who would probably never break off from drink, but would go on from bad to worse, till the end was reached.

Upon second thoughts, Gold Buttons Bill concluded, and Nick agreed with his pard—as he always did—that it was never too late to mend; that, possibly, by kindness and good advice, coupled with the fearful experience he had just gone through, the professor might be made a better man. But they were at a loss what disposal to make of him.

One or both of them must return to Hard-up, explain their absence, and make arrangements for the defense of the town against the Hyenas the coming night.

The sun was now up, but was not visible on the west side of the range, though it brightened up the scene above, below, and afar over the plains toward the Rio Grande.

The breathing of the doctor became more natural, yet he showed no sign of returning consciousness, but he seemed to sink into a comatose state; and, as it was impossible to carry him down the steep mountain-side, it was decided that Nick would remain with him, while Bill returned to the burg.

Nick collected a quantity of the dry foliage of the pine, that had lodged in the crevices of the rocks, and constructed a primitive couch, upon which they laid the miserable wretch of humanity. Then Bill hastened down the steep, promising to bring a canteen of water when he returned, and also some food and coffee, with the medicine-chest of poor Professor Pills.

After the departure of his pard, Nugget Nick formed a couch for himself, bound the wrists and ankles of the doctor, to make sure that he would not escape, in the event of his partially regaining consciousness. Then, weary, worn, and very sleepy, he lay down, and, in a few minutes, was in a profound slumber.

Meanwhile, Black Eagle had watched the two men from his hiding-place, and decided that, as they had done all they could to restore and care for the man he had cut down from the lone pine, it must be that he had unintentionally done them a service.

This he was persuaded, was another proof that the spirits of his fathers were watching over him, and were ruling his mind and actions.

After Gold Buttons Bill had left for the town, the Apache youth made his way toward the secret cave, resolved to ascertain if the lone occupant was alive.

CHAPTER XXIII.

APACHE SENSE OF HONOR.

BLACK EAGLE, when striding toward the cavern in which Professor Pills had placed El Negro, decided that he would proceed first to re-stake his mustang to fresh grass, after watering the animal.

The reader will remember that the Indian youth had, upon discovering Gold Buttons Bill high up the range the previous evening, left his mustang in the foot-hills, and stole up the side of the range for the purpose of gaining his first scalp. But the bear had foiled his attempt to shoot either of the pards.

It was a fatiguing trip to the point where the mustang had been left, and the wounds of the young Apache had, from so much exertion, be-

come inflamed. He, therefore, sought a spring of cool water in which he bathed them, pounding some prickly pear into pulp and applying it—this being the most cooling and healing salve that could be used.

He then made his way to the place where he had shot Full Hand and Big Bowie, and securing the rifles and revolvers which he had secreted, started slowly down the range. At length he reached the foot-hills, but the heavy load had taxed his strength to the utmost.

There he rested, attended to his mustang, again secreted his plunder, and then retraced his steps to the secret cave, using caution to avoid being discovered by the men of Hard-up.

The sun was some two hours high when Black Eagle reached the outer entrance to the cavern, and he entered the dark passage, which was screened from observation by a clump of cedars.

He was forced to strike a light with flint steel. There were plenty of dry leaves and twigs that had been blown into the passage, and he soon had a small fire at which he lighted a torch of resinous wood, of which there was an abundance lying near.

Then he continued on into the dark caverns, until he reached the blocked up entrance of the cave-chamber in which Professor Pills had placed the bandit chief.

The Indian youth removed the rocks which he had placed against the block of granite which swung on an iron pivot. He pulled this to one side, and, taking the torch, entered. His first glance was at the couch.

There lay the form of the man brought thither by the maniac doctor, just as Black Eagle had left it. Indeed, it could not have been otherwise, as there was no possible way of escape except by the stone blockaded way, and this had not been disturbed.

Black Eagle knew not whether the man was alive or dead, but he intended soon to ascertain.

There was a box of candles in one corner of the chamber, with quite a quantity of provisions; and the young red-skin, who would not have known the use the former were intended for had he not, on his previous visit, found one burning, at once lighted several. These he succeeded in standing on rough projections of the walls, and thus the apartment was quite brilliantly illuminated.

Taking one in his hand, he bent over the couch, with much interest and curiosity.

The outlaw chief was breathing, but quite faintly; and evidently had not, during the absence of Black Eagle, been conscious of his surroundings. Indeed he had, the greater part of the time, been in almost utter darkness; for the solitary candle had burned out, soon after the Apache boy had taken his departure.

The face of the bandit captain was ghastly, and the lids were nearly closed over his eyes. His features were pinched and drawn, his black hair was tangled, and his arms lay listless upon the couch, just as they had been placed.

Altogether El Negro presented a decidedly uncanny sight.

Black Eagle had admired him for his bravery, and for the scorn he had manifested for his executioners. And now, as he gazed upon him, so weak and helpless, he admired him for the strength and fortitude shown in battling with death.

He resolved that, if such were possible, this man should live.

He might be the enemy of the white pards, but nevertheless he should live to die a different and less disgraceful death.

With this object, the savage youth proceeded to administer some of the brandy, that remained in the bottle left by the mad doctor. The breathing of the bandit became more heavy, and there was a slight twitching of the muscles. The young Indian felt sure, by these evidences, that the man would yet live through it all.

He could not understand why the white men had attempted to hang him. They were brave, he knew, and this puzzled him.

Why did they not fight this man, if an enemy, as warriors should, with knife or revolver, giving him equal chance with them?

Then it occurred to Black Eagle that he had stolen upon the whites himself—the two whom he had shot—and had killed them both unawares. Still, this was the mode of warfare he had been taught; but he knew the whites often stood within a few paces of each other, and shot to kill, openly and in broad daylight.

It was certain that no Indian ever hated another to the extent of hanging him, and thus condemning him to eternal torture in the "dark valley."

In short, Black Eagle was satisfied with his own conduct, and was proud of himself generally. His black eyes glittered, his symmetrical form stood erect, his head proudly poised.

Prince-like the youth appeared—a red prince of the prairies.

His first resolve was that he would celebrate his victory, have his first scalp-dance, there in the heart of the mountain, with only the almost dead white chief present. He could scarcely be called a witness, although Black Eagle felt that it would be very gratifying to him if the man on the couch should witness the dance.

He painted his face afresh with the stripes and bars of war, which he had no right to assume until he had taken his first scalp.

Proud as a young monarch when first ascending his throne was the young brave when he had put the war-colors upon his brow and cheeks.

Having prepared himself, he poured more brandy into the mouth and over the head of El Negro. Then striding to within three paces of the table, he jerked his scalping-knife, and for a moment stood still and silent as a statue, gazing fixedly at the trophies of war which were before him.

Then Black Eagle's form dropped to a half-bent position, his arms hanging straight and listless, as if the muscles were entirely powerless or the bones broken at the shoulders.

His eyes were bent upon the floor of the cavern, his knife pointing downward. His knees were bent, and his body curved forward.

Then with a slow, weird chant, a monotonous repetition of guttural sounds, strange and unearthly, he circled around, bending up and down both body and legs, but not to anything like an erect position. Many of these movements were made during the course of a single turn of the body.

But his movements gradually became faster and still faster, his chant louder and still louder, until he seemed to fly.

Thus for a time. Then he became erect.

He had been representing his childhood and boyhood, to the time when he had taken his first scalp—only the evening before—and he had suddenly become a warrior.

His knife flashed, cutting the air in circles in a rapid manner; while, in spasmodic hop and jump, his long hair flying and his black eyes flashing, he circled in a mad dance. His chant became loud and exultant while he made violent cuts into the empty space. As he did so, he shot out terrific whoops of war.

His expression and actions changed to fierceness and hate, as though he was battling for life amid a score of foes.

A most unearthly and infernal scene it was. There, in that secret cavern, where lay the insensible form of the bandit chief, the youthful brave whooped and danced.

But, slowly the heavy lids of El Negro opened; his naturally bright and keen eyes, now blurred and almost expressionless, looking for the first time upon his surroundings, since they had flashed out defiance at the men of Hard-up. They beheld what surely was enough, in his weak condition of mind and body, to cause him to think himself in the spirit, and no longer in the flesh.

Surely, he must have thought, this is the anteroom of Hades!

To make more sure of this, El Negro had no feeling, no sensibility whatever, except the wandering thoughts in his brain. His whole frame was so nearly paralyzed that he was unconscious of having either body or limbs.

All at once the dance of Black Eagle ended with a still louder whoop than any of the preceding.

Instantly his keen gaze became fastened upon the recumbent form of the outlaw, and he saw that the eyes of the man so near death were open.

With one bound, his knife circling over his head, the newly fledged warrior was at the side of the couch of skins. Then his bright blade once more cut the air, descending with great velocity until its point actually touched the breast of the bandit chief; when the weapon was arrested in its course, for there was not the slightest change of expression in the eyes of El Negro, nor did he move arm or leg a hair's breadth.

With an "ugly" of extreme astonishment, at the same time taking a step backward in superstitious alarm, Black Eagle sheathed his knife.

He then folded his arms, and stood gazing down into the ashen face of El Negro.

Had the latter thrown up his hand to arrest the knife, or manifested the slightest fear, or action of self-defense, the blade would not have stopped in its course, but would have been driven to the hilt in his breast.

As it was, the red youth sprung erect again, sheathed his knife, returned the scalps to his belt, and buckled the arms he had taken from his victim, Big Bowie, around his waist.

He then administered another dose of the brandy to El Negro.

The Apache would not slay a man who was insano or insensible; and the outlaw chief was, in his estimation, one or the other, or he would have cringed, or striven to ward off the blow.

If he was able to see, and could realize his danger, then he was indeed too brave a man thus to die.

Such was the conclusion of Black Eagle.

CHAPTER XXIV.

NINA, THE NEMESIS.

BLACK EAGLE had intended to remain in the secret cave all day, but his scalp-dance had awakened the war-spirit of his people in his breast, and, as his patient seemed unable to move a muscle, he decided that he would

make a scout, and ascertain all that he could in connection with the bad whites.

There had been a large number of these, as the young Apache had seen, at the lone pine, with the object of carrying away the man before him. This nearly dead man must be, he concluded, the chief of the bad whites who had attacked the town, and he and others had been captured.

The white squaw who had visited the tree must be the chief's daughter; and both she and the band of men who had been there before her must believe the man they had sought to be dead—must believe that the body they had found at the foot of the steep, and borne away down the range, was the one of which they were in search.

It was thus that the Indian youth reasoned, and his belief was that the furious maiden had joined the band of rough and desperate men who were her father's followers.

He also knew that his two white friends had expected to find their victim still hanging, and they had seen instead another man, who was evidently insane, attempt to hang himself. They had, when they reached the platform, found that this madman had also been cut down, although they could have seen no other human being, and could upon their arrival discover none in the vicinity.

Black Eagle felt positive the band of bad whites and the young squaw meditated vengeance on the town, and the up-range pards. cared nothing for Hard-up, or any one in it except the two men who had saved his life. These he resolved to serve, as far as it was in his power to do so, even to the risking of his life.

With this object in view, our young red friend extinguished all the candles except one, left the cave chamber, and barricaded the entrance as he had previously done. He then made his way through the dark passage to the open air and bright sunlight.

Proceeding down the range along the side of the same, keeping all the time at nearly the same distance from its base, he gained a position from which he could view the town below, and also the platform and the lone pine.

In Hard-up all was quiet, but few of the miners being visible.

Upon the level-topped rock, he beheld, to his surprise, the crazed being who had attempted to hang himself; and, with him, one of the white men who had saved him from the bear. The mailman was bound hand and foot, and both of them appeared to be asleep.

This was a singular and startling sight to Black Eagle, but he had by this time ceased to be surprised at anything. One fact was evident, and that was that the insane man was looked upon as a friend by the white pards. And this was strange, as he had been one, acting secretly, who strove to restore to consciousness the chief of the bad whites. To him it appeared, that this supposed friend of those two men was their enemy.

The red youth knew that his white friends were much mystified. He knew also that they expected to be attacked again by those who had, on the previous night, assaulted the town; for the vengeful gestures toward them, of the maiden, as they had stood gazing through a "long-eye" at her, could not well have been mistaken by them.

Such thoughts as these caused the young Apache to hasten on his self-imposed mission. He knew that the band of bad white men had gone down the range, and he had watched the young white squaw, and seen her when she had descended the mountain-side, and dashed away to a *mote* between two foot-hills. Later on, he had seen, but indistinctly, a body of horsemen depart from the same spot, and he concluded they were the same band who had been at the lone pine in quest of the body of their chief, and who had borne away the corpse.

Black Eagle, therefore, made his way up the mountain-side, and, after reaching a favorable place, again descended to the base of the range. He was now near the *mote* where the Hyenas had awaited their queen, agreeably to her orders.

It was an easy matter, in the sunlight, for the eagle eyed Apache boy to follow the trail of the outlaws; but he was compelled to use great caution, and keep in concealment, using his judgment as to the course they would naturally travel in many places;

as he could not, without exposing himself to probable spies, follow along the trail.

At last he reached the great gulch, and, although its bed was sandy and rocky, and the bandits had bound blankets upon the hoofs of their horses, Black Eagle knew they had passed up the same; for the very good reason that there was no trail south of the entrance, this proving that the band had gone no further down the range.

Confident of finding them, the youthful Indian, keeping screened by bush and boulder, went on his way; and he was so fortunate as to discover one of the Hyenas, who was on guard at the entrance of the dark passage that led to their stronghold. The sentinel wore a black mask, and stepped out from the passage, at times, to peer down the gulch; evidently expecting some one, or suspicious of the coming of enemies.

In this way the young red-skin was informed of the secret way to the stronghold of the bad whites, and he crawled quite near it; the thick bushes favoring him, as they extended some distance both up and down the base of the north wall of the gulch.

Being perfectly familiar with the formation of the mountain ranges of the hunting-grounds of his tribe, and of the many hidden vales that were shut in from view by rocky walls of great height, Black Eagle felt assured that there was a valley to which the guarded passage led. But as it was impossible for him to pass the guard, and in his wounded state decidedly risky to attempt to slay him, the Apache boy decided to climb up the wall of the gulch at its lowest point, pass along north, and in that way endeavor to effect an entrance.

He lost no time in carrying out his intentions.

After several attempts, he made the ascent and gained a view of the base of the cliff directly below him.

He had scrutinized the valley in vain to discover any human being, but could perceive none until he had crept along some distance further, when he caught a sight of what fairly startled him. A circle of desperate visaged men, all armed to the teeth, were below him, in the valley.

They were nearly a score in number.

In the center of that circle was a grave, and at the bottom of it a blanketed form.

Beside it knelt the pale-faced maiden with long black hair.

Black Eagle knew that the bandits believed themselves to be burying their chief.

He had arrived at a very favorable time to avoid discovery.

Soon the young white squaw arose, and threw a mass of flowers which lay near her into the grave. She then made a gesture to the men, and they broke the circle, marching in single file past the grave; each stopping at its head, and casting in a handful of earth.

When all had made the circuit, the maiden gave another signal, at the same time drawing a glittering dagger from her belt. The men all jerked their bowies, and crowded closely together around her and the grave; each with his head uncovered, and holding his knife extended in his right hand. The girl held her dagger over the grave, and she was surrounded by a circle of glittering steel.

A few of the men were Mexicans, and as Black Eagle had learned their language from captives brought from Montezuma Land by his father, he was enabled to know what the oath was which those around the grave were taking.

It was spoken by the chief's daughter, first in English, then in Spanish.

"Hyenas!" she cried out; "here, over the corpse of El Negro, your chief, swear with me, your chosen queen."

"Swear by all the fiends, by your best heart's blood, which you hope will be spilled if you break your oath, and by your regard for me and my father's memory! Swear that you hope to be hanged like dogs, as was your captain, if you do not obey me, and have revenge for the dastardly hanging of El Negro! Swear that you will do my every bidding without question, and follow, even to the doors of death, Nina Noche, the Nemesis, your queen!"

"We swear," burst from every mouth in deep tones, sounding strange and weird in that mount inclosed vale.

Nina Noche stepped aside, and soon the grave was filled up.

But Black Eagle knew that they had buried the wrong man.

He had gained much knowledge besides.

He had heard of that man, El Negro, a captain of men who wore black cloth on their faces, and made war for plunder upon their own people, and he knew that he now had that noted chief in the secret cave wholly in his power.

He had also learned, beyond doubt, that Nina Noche and the band of her father, who had chosen her as their chief—an act very ridiculous to the young brave—had sworn vengeance upon the town of Hard-up and all therein, especially Gold Buttons and Nugget Nick.

Black Eagle congratulated himself upon having reached his perch at so opportune a time.

No sooner had the grave been closed, and its top covered with heavy stones to prevent its being molested by wolves, than the little vale presented a most animated scene; the very opposite to that upon which the red youth had looked, when he first peeped downward.

Every man ran for his equipments, and then to his horse, the bandit queen proceeding up the shelf, and entering a cave.

In five minutes more, the Hyenas were seated in their saddles, armed and equipped for war, and with black masks over their faces.

They were placed in pairs, the horses fronting toward the dark passage that led to the gulch.

A minute or two after, Nina Noche came quickly out from the cave, and passed down the shelf to the level.

She had on a full suit of man's attire, consisting of highly ornamented buckskin *jaqueta* and breeches. A wide-brimmed sombrero was on her head, and her long hair hung as before, betraying her sex. It was probable that she wore this costume merely for convenience, for she made no effort at disguise, not even wearing a mask.

Mounting her black steed, she led the Hyenas into the dark passage.

The Apache youth was convinced of the necessity of his speedily climbing up to the highest point, from which he could command a view of the mouth of the gulch, as also of the plain toward the Rio Grande.

He was relieved, but for some time puzzled, as he beheld the band of masked riders pass from the gulch, and strike out over the plain toward the wooded creek, following the stage trail.

He waited until the bandits disappeared in the heavy timber, and for some time after; but they did not make their appearance on the other side of the creek.

Black Eagle's conclusion was that the Hyenas were about to ambush and plunder the stage from San Diego, which was probably due at Hard-up the coming evening.

Satisfied that the night to come would be pregnant with startling events, yet believing it impossible that it could equal the one just past in that respect, the Indian boy proceeded to make his way down into the gulch.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN EXPECTED ARRIVAL.

WHEN Black Eagle reached the bed of the gulch, the idea occurred to him to again pass up the same, ascertain if there had been a guard stationed at the entrance to the stronghold of the Hyenas, and if not he would go into the valley, inspect the cave, and without doubt would there find some valuable plunder which he could secrete in the gulch.

His intention was to steal a couple or more horses, and pack the plunder he had already gained, and that which he might gain, upon those animals; taking them in the lead, when he returned to his village beyond the Texan border.

He would make—did the spirits of his fathers still continue to watch over him—a grand *entree* into the village of his portion of the Apache tribe from this, his first war-path.

Filled with exultation at the success which had thus far attended him, Black Eagle, with the stealth and caution of his people, made his way as on the previous occasion along the base of the gulch wall. Soon he

reached his former station, from which he had viewed the entrance to the dark passage through the adamantine wall that led to the secret vale.

He scarcely thought the Hyenas could have been so imprudent as to leave their stronghold unguarded, and he was not greatly surprised to hear voices, which proved that there were two guards at the gulch entrance of the passage, in place of one as previously.

Crawling nearer in the bushes, the Apache boy gained a point from which he could not only see the speakers through the foliage, but hear their words quite plainly.

Fortunately, for many, as it afterward proved, one was a Mexican and the other an American; the latter being obliged to speak in Spanish, to make himself more clearly understood.

The Greaser had evidently just joined the American, coming from the inner end of the passage; and both were preparing to smoke, the former rolling a cigarette, while the other chipped off tobacco from a plug of "nigger-head."

"Why went Nina Noche to the west, when the night brings hot work for the Hyenas?" asked the Mexican, who seemed not to have been well posted as to the latest movements and intentions of their queen.

"For a mighty good reason, Juan," answered his comrade, striking a match and lighting his pipe.

"Didn't yer see Four Jacks come in jist a b'ilin' 'bout ten minut's 'fore we'uns planted El Negro?"

"Si, Senor."

"Wa-al, he had rid like a cyclone from San Diego, whar he's bin layin' fer infermashe 'bout spec'lators an' rich Jews, what mought glide this-a-way with plenty o' dust, ter give we'uns notice what stage they'd come on."

"But he foun' out somethin' purty important, though thar mayn't be much dust ter be panned out o' ther hearse what's comin' ter Hard-up ter-night."

"He diskivered, ax'dently, by bein' in ther nex' room ter a piece o' caliker what hed roved et San Diego from up-range, thet she war on her way ter Hard-up, an' thet she war ther sister o' Buttons Bill, ther condemned cuss what air thar now."

"Four Jacks didn't know nothin' 'bout ther Up-Range Pards bein' hyer-a-ways, ontill he heerd ther gal tell somebody thet Bill hed gone ter Hard-up fer ter hunt El Negro, an' git our Cap strung up fer shootin' his dad at Bowlderburg."

"Buttons Bill an' Nugget Nick broke up ther confisicators, what El Negro war cap'n of et Bowlderburg. We'uns warn't in that lay-out, but we've hearn a heap about it."

"Wa-al, hit 'pears thet Buttons Bill skuted from thet burg, without his sister knowin' he war goin' fer ter lay fer our cap'n ontill arter he'd gone; she thinkin' he'd lit out up-range. When she foun' out whar he'd gone, she jumped a hearse, an' lunged fer San Diego, whar she hed ter wait fer ter-day's hearse fer Hard-up; she bein' skeer'd 'most ter death, thinkin' her brother 'u'd git sent over ther range by El Negro."

"Wa-al, Four Jacks heerd her tell ther hull story, an' he lit out fer ter let ther Cap know ther Up-Range Pards war on ther war-path arter him. He didn't know they hed roved in Hard-up, got in thar work speedy, an' hed our cap'n strung up a limb, ontill he roved hyer."

"Our queen, when she knowed the sister of Buttons Bill war comin' on ther hearse ter-night, war jist rearin', teasin' glad; an' she sworded she'd lay fer ther coach, on ther creek, an' kerral ther caliker."

"Nina would ruther git her claws ontter Button Bill's sister than skupe in a hull hearse full o' dust. McBbe so, thar will be a leetle o' ther needful 'mong ther pilgrims what's along; but ther boyees doesn't keer whether thar bees or not, es long es they gits deadwood on ther sister o' ther cuss, what they calls ther 'corraler o' ther crooked.'"

"When he knows his sis' air in ther Hyeners' cave, I reckon he'll wilt inter his butes, an' t'ar his long ha'r all out; wishin' he'd hung hisself 'fore he started ther game o' stringin' up our cap'n."

"Thet's ther biz what tuck our queen an' pards ter ther creek, 'stead o' restin' fer hot work ter-night. Miss Nina hev gut some-

thin' else in her head regardin' thet hearse, which I didn't catch onter.

"She's a whooper, she air—a cyclone blizzard an' norther, all in one—when she gits her back up in reg'lar curvator o' the spine; an' that's her condish, jist 'bout now, you bet!"

"She stands her dad's death ormighty well. I thort she'd ha' wilted, like a rooted-up weed in ther sun."

"What will Senorita Nina do with sister of Gold Buttons?" asked the Greaser.

"Dang me if I know! Reckon she'll keep her shet up a while, lettin' Bill know she's got her; jist ter tortur' him, an' draw him this-a-way, so ez she kin kerral him an' string him up, ez he did her dad. I wouldn't gi'n a picayune fer ther gal, arter Nina Noche gits her, an' she'll wish she hedn't bin borned, afore ther moon's much older."

Juan laughed coarsely.

The young Apache listened intently to this detail of the plot, that was to wring the heart of the man who had saved his life.

It maddened his savage blood beyond control.

He jerked the revolver which he had taken from the belt of Big Bowie, leveled it, and pulled trigger in an instant.

The report was followed by a loud yell from the Mexican, who fell forward, dead; while his compazion darted into the dark arched passage, in terror.

Ten minutes after, Black Eagle strode down the gulch, with another rifle, and belt of arms; he having plundered the Greaser, whom he had shot through the heart. Another scalp was hanging to his belt, and the young brave had a disdainful look, as he glanced over his shoulder; as if he hoped the remaining outlaw would follow and give him battle.

He gave a triumphant war-whoop upon reaching the mouth of the gulch, and then gazed across the stretch of plain beyond the foot-hills, which extended to a dark green serpentine line of timber; marking the course of the creek where, the coming night, he had resolved to risk his life against terrible odds, and save the sister of his white friend from the squaw chief.

The Indian youth had not the slightest doubt in regard to his being guid d by the spirits of his warrior ancestors—that it was they who had impelled him to again visit the entrance to the secret valley of the Hyenas, that he might gain important knowledge.

Gratitude for service and kindness done, and hatred for injury and injustice done—these, and the acquisition of scalps, made up the religion of Black Eagle. And his sensibilities were finer, and his mental organization of a more intelligent type, from the admixture of Mexican blood through which he received his gentler instincts.

The Apache boy had a long distance to travel.

He must pass down the range for miles amid the foot-hills, before he could cross the plain to the creek bottom without danger of being discovered by the bandits.

Yet he resolved that he would not return for his mustang, and risk discovery by the men of Hard-up, for when he did enter the town he intended that it should be in such a manner as not to force his white friends, the Up-Range Pards, into any difficulty by defending him.

The men of the burg, and indeed the miners without exception, hated the Apaches, and would shoot the young savage on sight; and Black Eagle as cordially hated all whose skins were white, with the exception of the two men who had saved him from being torn to pieces by the bear. These he would befriend to the last, and also the sister of Gold Buttons, whom he had vowed to save from the vengeance of Nina Noche.

He now knew why Gold Buttons had acted in so prominent a manner in the hanging of El Negro, since he had heard the bad white man tell his comrade that the chief of the Hyenas had killed the father of Bill. Black Eagle now saw that he had it in his power to do Bill a great favor, by delivering up El Negro, although apparently so near death at the present time, to him.

But the red youth lingered not when he had once decided upon the course he intended to pursue.

He proceeded, in long strides, down the

range toward the south, amid the foot-hills—a long and tedious trip.

Then, when secure from the view of any possible bandit spy on the margin of the timber, high up near the stage-road, he struck across the plain to the creek; the bottom-timber of which he entered, some two hours before sunset.

There he halted, bathed his wounds in the stream, applied some fresh pulp of the *nopal*, binding it with the fiber of an aloe plant; then, after capturing and devouring a soft-shelled turtle, he, being now greatly refreshed, proceeded stealthily; gliding through the shades, with senses strained, and weapons gripped for instant use, toward the ambushed Hyenas, who he knew were near the ford, and lying in wait for the stage from San Diego.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SEEKING FOR SIGN.

WHEN Gold Buttons Bill returned to Poison Palace, after leaving Nugget Nick in charge of the unfortunate Professor Pills, he found all the men of Hard-up still soundly sleeping upon the floor of the gaming portion of the large apartment.

Bill was not sorry, far from it, that the miners were asleep; for they needed rest after the deprivation of the past night, coupled with their extreme exertions and the excitement they had undergone.

Besides, our young friend was in some perplexity. He and his pard had been able to find no trace of the man who had cut the demented doctor down from the tree.

And this was not the only mystery of the same character. El Negro had been cut down also; and, from the manner and gestures of his daughter while she stood at the spot, it was obvious that neither she nor any of the Hyenas had a hand in the act.

The body of the bandit chief had been spirited away, and doubtless that of the doctor would have been removed also, had not he and his pard been so near at hand.

As this latter thought occurred to Bill, he was startled by another, that was born of it.

This was neither more nor less than the possibility that El Negro had been cut down before life was extinct!

True, it was highly improbable; but as the young man thought more and more upon the subject, the improbability became less and less in his mind.

When Gold Buttons reached the hotel, he sat down upon a bench, and plunged into deep thought, unmolested by the sounds of snoring which came from many of the weary sleepers that lay near him. And, as he meditated, he reasoned that, as Nina Noche had evidently known nothing of her father, it was probable that none of the Hyenas did, and therefore it had been some stranger who had removed the body.

But, if this man had been a friend of El Negro, would he not at once have informed the daughter of her father's rescue?

It was reasonable to suppose that he would.

What could it all mean?

Bill determined to return to the lone pine, and examine the rocky ledges and surroundings of the platform, as it was now sufficiently light for that purpose. With this view, he procured a canteen, which he filled with water, and also possessed himself of Professor Pills's medicine chest.

By this time the landlord was awake. He rubbed his eyes, and gazed stupidly about him; not seeming to know where he was, or to be able to recall the doings of the night.

Bullion Bill, who stood near the rear door, gave a gesture of silence, as Fresh Frank caught sight of him. This awakened him thoroughly. He began to suspect danger. But Bill, seeing this, walked on tiptoes toward him.

"You needn't be scared, Frank," he said, in a whisper. "Nick and I have been up at the lone pine. El Negro was cut down, and carried away, before his daughter reached there."

"She went away furious, and since then Professor Pills, who got away from her, had the *del trem*, and hung himself, or at least tried to. He was cut down before we got to him. We found him nearly dead, and Nick is with him now."

"Who it was that cut them down, we don't know. It is a mystery, and I'm going to

look for 'sign' now. The boys ought to have let the doctor sleep under the table where he was. It was an outrage to pour more liquor down him, in the condition in which he was."

Fresh Frank listened to all this in astonishment, mingled with fright.

"Great gallinippers!" he exclaimed. "Yer don't say so? Ef thet hellyun hev bin tuck away, he's alive! I'm gamblin' on hit. Ther ole boy takes keer o' his own. But mebbe so the rope broke!"

"No, it was cut with a sharp knife—a clean cut."

"Did you-uns hurry away?"

"Yes, we left at once."

"Then ther boss cut-throat hev bin saved, an' he'll raid me ag'in! Jist yeou see ef he ain't on ther rampage ag'in in less'n a week."

"Well, it's all a mystery. That daughter of his don't know where he is."

"What did she want wi' ther professor?"

"That's another thing I'd like mighty well to know," was the reply.

"An' yer say, Pills war lunyfied, an' jist lynched hisself?"

"Just that. He climbed the tree, howling like a demon, and tied the lariat around his neck. Nick and I witnessed it. But he was cut down, and I'd give a 'slug' to know who it was that did it. Whoever it was, he must have been concealed in the tree-top."

"But I must go. Don't breathe a word of what I've told you to the boys. Let them sleep while they can, for there'll be hot work to-night. The Hyenas are sharpening their claws and teeth."

With these words, Gold Buttons strode out the rear door.

The landlord went softly toward his bar, to brace himself with an "eye-opener."

"They'll bu'st me up yit," he muttered. I wish I'd skuted back Texas-way, er stopped in Frisco?"

Gold Buttons hastened up the rocky side of the range, still in deep thought, or he might have caught sight of Black Eagle, who was now flitting from one clump of cedars to another. Had he seen the young Apache, he might have connected him with the double mystery of the lone pine.

On reaching the platform, he was more amused than surprised to find his pard in a heavy slumber, he having secured the maniac doctor beyond the possibility of escape, in order that he himself might enjoy much-needed repose.

Gold Buttons Bill relieved himself of the canteen and medicine-chest, deciding not to disturb Nick; and, after a brief rest, and a careful study of the surroundings, he finally resolved to climb the huge pine, and make an examination of the tree itself.

It was not long before his keen eyes had discovered the chafed and abraded bark, about the limb to which Black Eagle had strapped himself.

At first he was at a loss to know what had occasioned this, but in a little time he perceived how one could be seated comfortably on a branch below it, and be sustained, when asleep, by a strap fastened around the one thus scratched. A man had, beyond doubt, passed the night in that position, concealed by the foliage.

Gold Buttons felt that, possibly he had been foiled in keeping his oath of vengeance—that, for all he knew, El Negro might be alive, and soon might return more furiously vindictive than ever.

Descending to the platform, Bill gazed down the mountain-side, seeing still further 'sign' in the rags that clung to the jagged rocks. At considerable risk, he climbed down until he reached the point where the body had lodged.

He knew that it could not have gone any further, unless carried by the hands of men. It was gone!

It was plain that some one, whether living or dead, had been hurled from the rocky plateau.

Who could it have been?

The doctor was living. It must, therefore, have been the bandit chief.

But why had he been cut down for such a purpose?

An enemy would rather have allowed him to remain hanging, like a felon.

A friend would not have thrown him down the steep.

Another idea occurred to our friend.

He would visit the scene of the execution of the other Hyenas.

There had been four, but Ace High, who was fatally wounded, had died previous to the lynching. Thus three had been left to the avengers.

Gold Buttons Bill was soon at his destination, where another surprise awaited him.

The lynched bandits had also been carried away!

Could it be possible that the band had recovered these bodies, and that of their leader and not informed Nina Noche?

It did not seem reasonable.

Besides, El Negro had been hurled down the precipice. It could not, therefore, have been his own men who had done it. And, if but one man had been concerned in the affair surely he would not have been equal to the task of bearing away the trio of corpses to any great distance.

Reasoning thus, Bill began a careful search of the rocks, clefts and seams in the vicinity.

And not long had he to investigate.

Soon in a cleft, which in the darkness, when the doctor had secreted the dead, must have appeared far deeper than it really was, the young man discovered two of those he sought.

But where was the third?

A further and much more extended search was made, but there was no trace of it to be found.

The mystery grew deeper.

Bill returned to the platform, there finding Nick and Professor Pills as before.

At once he opened the medicine chest, to see if there was in it anything that might be of benefit to the doctor.

The first object he saw was a silver tube, and with it was a pair of curiously bent nippers of the same metal.

CHAPTER XXVII.

FIXING THE OFFENSE.

The face of Gold Buttons Bill wore a most singular expression as he examined the silver tube and nippers.

For what purpose had the mad doctor used these two articles?

The tube bore several small dents at one end, that had evidently been caused by pinching the nippers upon it.

The most obvious, in fact the only thought came into the young man's mind at once. The size and shape of both instruments suggested it.

But why had such a tube been thus placed?

There was no one ill, to Bill's knowledge, in Hard-up, with any throat disease which might call for its use.

Suddenly, although he had not thought of the matter for years, he recalled a sensational article he had once read in a newspaper. It was to the effect that a silver tube had been inserted in the throat of a man about to be hanged, and that through it his life had been saved.

Gold Buttons Bill reviewed in thought everything that occurred when he and Nick produced the bandit chief before the men of Hard-up.

He marked well the speech of El Negro, and the doomed man's recklessness and daring.

He recalled the fact that the outlaw had asked for a drink, before leaving Poison Palace.

Who had given him that drink?

He remembered perfectly.

It was Professor Pills!

More than that the doctor had been on hand promptly with the liquor, as if he had been expected to be called upon for it. This had not been noticed by Bill at the time, as in any way suspicious, but now it was of vast importance.

Then came the recollection of El Negro's begging to have removed a portion of the gag that remained in his throat.

Professor Pills had been up to time on that occasion also.

Although it seemed impossible that the doctor could be such a traitor to the men of Hard-up, yet Gold Buttons felt now positive that he had inserted the tube in El Negro's throat, at the time when he pretended to be removing the piece of handkerchief.

Then came the important question:

Was the bandit chief alive?

His neck had not been dislocated. He

had stood upon his feet, and had been drawn up slowly. This had made it possible for him to have been cut down, and brought back to life; especially when the hypothesis of the silver tube was taken into consideration.

Then Bill reviewed the other singular evidence which he had discovered.

But two of the three dead Hyenas remained in the cleft.

Where was the third?

Why had he been removed?

The solution of all this was now clear in his mind.

His decision was, that the missing outlaw had been brought to the platform, and hurled down the cliff side, on purpose to cause those who should discover the remains to believe them to be those of El Negro.

Bill's belief now was that the bandit chief still lived; indeed he was positive in that belief.

But was the professor capable of having done all this?

The young man now remembered that he had not seen him in the crowd, when the rush was made to drag El Negro to execution.

He had, then, taken another course, and this unquestionably was it. To cover his tracks, he had dragged up one of the Hyenas, and substituted him for the man he wished to save.

This last seemed strange, however, for the doctor must have known that, if he wished to make the miners think this, he should not have thrown the corpse down the steep.

The outlaws would not have done this.

Bill was, therefore, forced to the conclusion that Professor Pills had had no understanding with the Hyenas, except their chief, in connection with this singular rescue from death.

He had, too, it was obvious, secreted El Negro, unknown to the band, and to Nina.

Verily, the doctor had played the game well; leaving evidence that would cause the men of Hard-up to believe that the outlaws had borne away their dead, and they, on the other hand, to surmise that the citizens had done this.

From the shreds of clothing that clung to the side of the cliff, it seemed certain that the Hyenas had discovered the body which they inferred was that of their leader, and had borne it away for burial. Of this, there could be little doubt.

But, why had Nina Noche been so infuriated at the disappearance of her father's body?

Could she have been acting a part?

Gold Buttons Bill was positive she was not. Her rage and fury had been much too violent, her gestures too meaning, for that.

In one way alone could this be accounted for.

The bandits must have deceived the girl in regard to the continued absence of her father. Then, when they had calmed down somewhat after their defeat, they had stolen from their stronghold—a spy having probably been sent in advance, who had reported the lynching to them—to recover the body of their chief.

This they had kept secret from the bereaved daughter, dreading the effect of such an announcement upon her.

She, believing her father to be a captive in the keeping of the men of Hard-up, had galloped, in desperation, to the door of Poison Palace, and while there had overheard the words that told El Negro's fate. It was then that she had charged into the bar, shooting wildly, and causing her horse to trample down all before her.

Her closing act was to catch up the drunken doctor before her on the saddle, and escape with her prize.

Just then the reason for this occurred to Gold Buttons Bill.

It was all plain enough.

Professor Pills was generally in funds, but no one knew where his money came from.

Of course, the bandit chief had kept him supplied.

He had been posted in the town, expressly to aid El Negro in an emergency.

Such had arrived, and the doctor did his duty in the case, as the silver tube proved.

This much Nina had known, and when she carried the wretched inebriate away from the hotel, her intention had been to kill

him should it prove that he failed to act upon his instructions.

In some way, the Professor had made his escape, and thus escaped death at her hands.

It was little wonder, then, that his brain became so demoralized, and his sufferings so terrible, that after her departure he had attempted to escape all the combined horrors that beset him in self-destruction.

But now came up another question.

Who had cut down the doctor?

This was a poser.

Our friend was compelled to give this up.

Then, where was El Negro?

He was alive—of that Bill felt almost certain.

He was now secreted somewhere in the mountains, doubtless in a very weak condition.

Only Professor Pills knew aught of his whereabouts, and the miscreant was likely to die for want of care and food.

Bill at once prepared a prescription, having the drugs at hand, which he gave to the doctor; although he felt that the poor wretch would be far better off if dead, for, did he disclose his perfidy, the men of Hard-up would certainly hang him.

But Bill had a use for the professor, and he resolved to keep his own counsel, for the present at least; only revealing the same to his pard Nick. And knowing that both he and Pills were likely to sleep for some time, the young man returned to the town.

There he found the "citz," all awakened and taking their "eye-openers."

All were curious as to what had been ascertained by Gold Buttons Bill, but the latter told only what he chose.

The attempted suicide of the doctor, his having been mysteriously cut down by some unknown person, and the disappearance of El Negro and the other Hyenas, these furnished ample food for comment and conversation, even while Gold Buttons was hurrying all hands up in preparing ammunition, and everything else that might be required to meet the anticipated attack on the coming night.

So excited were all, that none so much as thought of the stage from San Diego being due that night. Had they done so, a party would have galloped to the creek, to escort and guard the 'hearse' into the burg.

This they would have felt to be necessary, on account of the now thoroughly maddened Hyenas, and the threatened revenge of Nina Noche, the Nemesis, as she had named herself to her followers.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE INDIAN ON TIME.

BLACK EAGLE did not venture very near the ambush of the Hyenas, who were awaiting the arrival of the San Diego stage, until the sun had sunk below the horizon. Then he crawled slowly and cautiously, every sense on the alert, toward the point where the stage trail led from the western margin of the line of timber to the stream; and thence through that and beyond, to the plain that stretched to the foot-hills and the Solcdad mountains.

It was apparent that the stage would be obliged to pass through the timber after it had become quite dark, for the moon would not rise until some time after sunset.

The young brave had made sure that he would not miss being on hand when the attack was made upon the coach, by keeping himself secreted when waiting for the sun to set. From the margin of the timber where he was, he could see the vehicle a long distance away.

Eric long his keen ears caught the sound of gruff voices, and he also detected the scent of tobacco-smoke; this, however, would not betray the presence of men in the bottom to the occupants of the stage, as the breeze was from the north.

These sounds came from the opposite side of the creek, and were very important to the Apache youth, as he was on foot, and intended, if possible, to ride back to the range. His plans had been already formed, he would decide whether they were feasible, when he had examined the immediate vicinity of the place where the Hyenas had stationed themselves.

To his joy, he found that just below the ford, the branches and thick vines inter-

twined over and quite near the surface of the water.

Black Eagle could hardly suppress a cry of delight, for this favored the plan he had conceived in his mind.

Passing down the stream for some distance, he crossed to the opposite side by climbing a tree, and crawling from its branches to those of another, which stood on the opposite bank. He then lost no time in reaching the spot where the horses of the bandits were grazing.

He had now to practice the greatest caution.

Soon he perceived a man, seated against a tree.

Coming closer, he found that the outlaw was soundly sleeping.

It was the horse guard.

This was fortunate and encouraging.

The Indian boy then scrutinized the horses closely. Soon his eyes lighted upon the one that belonged to the bandit queen, which was by far the handsomest and fleetest in the band.

Why Nina Noche had chosen to station herself on foot, Black Eagle did not stop to consider. He only felt that it was fortunate for him that she had done so.

He quickly unloosed the lariat of the animal, first making friends with it by caressing its head. Strange to say, the horse manifested no fright whatever.

Before leading the black steed away, the red youngster hesitated a moment. Then he dropped the lariat, and stole stealthily away in the darkness.

A listener might have heard a scrambling noise in the bushes, at a little distance; but soon all was quiet. Then Black Eagle returned, with an extra scalp in his belt.

This made four trophies of his daring and bravery.

Hesitating no longer, he slowly led the black horse to the bank of the stream, and secreted the animal; though there was little need of this, for the darkness was sufficiently dense at that point, the foliage being rank and green.

Tearing this aside, the young Apache peeped through, and then sprung back, crawling rapidly toward the ford.

He had discovered the stage, and it was coming, as fast as the four horses could gallop toward the timber and the ford.

Black Eagle knew that the Hyenas were equally as well informed as himself, and that they had posted themselves ready for business. There was not a moment to lose.

He crawled rapidly, but with great caution, all the while listening intently for sounds from the stage. At length he ascended a tree, and made his way over on a long branch of the same to a point directly over the middle of the creek.

Then he slowly descended until he gained a position from which he could make a flying leap to the top of the coach.

Soon came the crack of the driver's whip, and the rattle of wheels; but the noise grew less when the driver slackened up, to pass down the bank into the ford.

A moment after the horses were in the stream, and the driver sprung down upon the pole, and unhitched the checks, to allow them to drink.

That instant a huge glaring blaze shot up from the side of the trail, above the east bank of the ford. The young Apache knew, from the scent, that it was dry grass.

The horses threw up their heads and plunged wildly in the waters.

The ford was brightly illuminated.

Affrighted faces appeared at the coach windows.

The driver was astounded. He stood upon the pole, gazing up the east bank.

There were no "outsides."

At once, out from the dark shades, sprung four men from each side, their faces covered with black masks, and leveled their rifles!

But at the same instant between the two parties, darted a singular form.

It was that of a maiden, though in male attire.

She blew a shrill whistle, and the travelers saw that the same number of men on foot were aiming at them from the west bank, while four mounted men were guiding their horses down into the ford.

"Shoot the first man who shows a weapon!" yelled Nina Noche; "but be careful not to

harm the girl! Produce your valuables, all of you, or we'll be forced to use you roughly.

"You're corralled by the Hyenas of Hard-up, commanded by the daughter of El Negro, at your service.

"You were unlucky enough, gents, to take the same hearse with the sister of Gold Buttons Bill, or you would not have been molested. Shell out, my boys! And then, Ribbons, you drive up this way!

"I want the sister of the man who hanged my father!"

To offer resistance to such a force would have been mere midsummer madness.

The driver mounted his seat, and brought the leaders around in position.

Every man at the windows was covered by three deadly tubes.

Not a word had been spoken by any one except Nina Noche.

The fire blazed high, causing the dark shades beyond the circle of its light to appear inky black.

No more wild and impressive scene could be imagined.

"Pass out your arms and valuables to my boys on the horses, and at once, or we'll ride the coach!"

Thus yelled the bandit queen.

The young girl in the stage had evidently been just awakened as Nina gave this second order, and she was terribly frightened.

She was a golden-haired and blue eyed little beauty, just developing into womanhood. Had there been the remotest chance of preventing her from falling into the hands of the outlaws, the six rough and ready men, who were her traveling companions, would have risked much to save her.

But it would have been sure death even to hesitate.

And Marie Montserrat, the sister of Gold Buttons Bill, resting her foot upon the upper step of the coach, which was level with the surface of the water, gazed around her in terror.

This scene lasted but a moment.

Black Eagle knew it was his only chance.

He drew the huge knife, which he had taken from Bowie Bill, and crashed the steel into the heart of the horseman next Marie Montserrat, on the down-stream side!

Hardly the knife left the young Apache's hand, when he shot downward himself; his feet striking on the other horseman's head.

The arms of the bandit fell, and he sunk from his horse into the stream; floating down it in companionship with his comrade, in misfortune as in crime.

The young brave had cleared his way.

The next moment, he was on the coach top, and had clasped the maiden with one arm. Then he plunged, with her, below the surface and swam off under water.

All this had been accomplished so rapidly, that the outlaws, who had their rifles leveled, actually lowered them, in their utter amazement.

But this state of affairs lasted but an instant.

Then Nina Noche yelled.

"Guard the coach, you on horseback! Come, boys; head off that red devil! He shall not cheat me out of my revenge."

The eight dismounted Hyenas, with Nina at their head, sped through the tangled bottom-timber, as best they could.

But they had gone only a short distance when they heard a horse crashing through the undergrowth, toward the stage road.

"Turn, men! We've passed them, and the young fiend has stolen one of our horses."

All sped back to the ford.

Just as they entered the road, a wild and exultant war-whoop echoed through the natural arches of the timber. All eyes turned, and, just on the verge of the circle of blazing grass, was the black steed of the bandit queen—the noble animal that had, many times, saved the life of El Negro by its speed.

Upon it rode Black Eagle, the young Apache, who was on his first lone war-path. And in the arms of the Indian youth was the limp form of a maiden—Marie Montserrat in a dead swoon!

The war shout again came from the young brave's throat.

Rifles belched fire, but they were a moment late. The red youth and the maiden were safe, and away!

Black Eagle had succeeded in what had seemed but a forlorn hope.

Like an arrow from a bow, shot the black steed and its precious burden, toward the rocky range; to create in the breast of William Montserrat, or Gold Buttons, the utmost astonishment and concern, when he should catch sight of the sister whom he supposed far distant and among friends.

It would create in him, also, friendship and regard for Black Eagle, the young Apache, whom the kind Fates had led himself and pard to preserve from death.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ONE TOUCH OF NATURE.

THE happiest red-skin, east or west of the Rockies, was Black Eagle, as he sped over the plain toward the range, with Marie Montserrat.

But, although the golden-haired maiden would have turned the heads of many, even among the most fastidious, yet the admiring glances of the youthful brave were not directed to the sister of Gold Buttons Bill; and he thought not of her, except that through his rescue of her he could show his gratitude to her brother.

The glances of admiration, and the proud air of possession, that were expressed by the Apache youth, were for the noble black steed he bestrode. He had gained the right to wear an eagle-feather in his fillet, and he felt that, could he ride this superb horse to the village of his people, he would indeed be the proudest and happiest young brave in Apache-eria.

Yet, he intended to deliver horse, as well as maiden, to Gold Buttons Bill.

This would be proving his gratitude indeed.

It would be a great sacrifice to give up the black steed, yet he resolved to do so.

He was not without a hope, however, that his white friend would present him with the horse.

As he had darted off with his prize, he was pleased, more than surprised or startled, to behold half a score Hyenas, led by Nina Noche, dash out from the dense timber at headlong speed, in pursuit.

He knew well, that no horses in the band of bad white men could overtake him, and he halted, turned the animal about, facing the bandits as they came, and shot out a tremendous yell.

Nor was he in the least concerned in regard to the insensible condition of the maiden. He noticed her but little, knowing that she had been terrified at the rough manner in which he had rescued her, as well as by his paint-daubed face.

She would, doubtless, think that to be in his power was something far more to be dreaded than being a captive to the outlaw band under Nina Noche.

All he regretted was, that he had been unable to scalp his victims, but he was determined on returning, and securing those trophies if possible. The daughter of El Negro would, of course, be furious; but Black Eagle gave himself no concern in that connection.

He had not the ghost of an idea of allowing himself to be overtaken.

Yet, he remembered that the horse was carrying double, and that, in the darkness, he was liable to stumble.

Consequently, his endeavor was to gain ground now, in order that he might travel more slowly when he should get among the foot-hills.

He could see that the pursuers were still keeping it up.

Nina was far in the lead of her men, her long black hair flying wildly behind her in the wind of her speed. She was so furious that she could not reason, or she would have known she could not overtake that fleet steed.

Black Eagle was aware that the moon would soon reach a height that would cause the night even west of the range to be much lighter; and this would be of great advantage to him.

Leaving the gulch to his right, when he reached the first line of foot-hills, the young Apache urged his horse toward Hard-up; al-

though, as he found, the animal manifested great objections to going in that direction. It kept striving to turn toward the gulch.

But the red youth knew he was safe from capture; for he, upon glancing back for the last time, discovered that the outlaw queen had been obliged to give up the pursuit.

Not till then did Black Eagle slacken the speed of the sable steed, and proceed with more caution on his difficult way.

When the inner foot-hills had been reached, Marie Montserrat regained her senses, and sprung upward in the utmost amazement and fright. It was no wonder, for she found herself in the arms of a painted savage, and speeding toward the range of mountains.

It was evident that she did not, at first, recall the near past.

She was rather dazed than terrified.

Then she began to struggle, striving to free herself.

But Black Eagle held her fast, his left arm about her waist. He then brought the horse to a halt and gazed into her face.

Something that she saw in the expression of the young Indian's eyes seemed to allay her fears.

She struggled no longer.

The Apache youth was puzzled.

He scarcely knew what to do or say.

He did not believe that the maiden understood the language of the Mexicans, much less that of his own people.

It was a strange picture which the pair presented.

Ere long Marie recalled the scene at the ford, and remembered the plunge which this Indian boy had made with her beneath the waters.

Could it be possible, she thought, that this savage youth had run such risks to capture her, and bear her to his mountain home?

Had he been alone, or had other Indians slain the outlaws and their beautiful queen? —she who had striven to capture her out of revenge for her father's death?

The words of Nina Noche implied that Marie's brother had gotten in his work, and was now in great danger. He had, it was evident, incurred the inveterate hatred of El Negro, perhaps by shooting the bandit chief; which appeared to have been the case, or Nina would not be in command of the band.

Such were the thoughts that now came into the mind of Marie Montserrat.

Black Eagle could remain silent no longer.

He resolved to speak in Spanish.

To his joy, he saw by the expression in the maiden's eyes, that she understood him.

"Sun shine in day," he began, "but hair of Gold Buttons's sister shine like sun in night. She is like the spirits Black Eagle see when eyes shut, when sleep."

"Black Eagle, he young brave, on first war-trail, but take scalps of bad white men. Their scalps hang at belt. He will wear eagle-feather, when go back to village."

"Black Eagle would never took scalp, never go back to people, never wear eagle-feather, had not Gold Buttons ride in mountains. Great bear tear Black Eagle's flesh. See!"

He pointed to his wounds.

"Gold Buttons Bill and Nugget Nick," he continued, "save life of Black Eagle. No let big bear tear to pieces and eat up."

"Heap fight, heap hang in white man's village. Village name Hard-up. Black Eagle hear bad white men talk in mountains. Say Gold Buttons's sister come in 'wheel-lodge' from San Diego. Say, Nina Noche bad squaw. She go to creek with bad white men."

"Say, steal sister of Gold Buttons Bill from 'wheel-lodge.' Black Eagle's heart big. Want pay Bill for save from bear. Say, save Bill's sister."

"Go down range. Run over plain; then up in bush and tree. Climb in tree. Wait for 'wheel-lodge.' Bad white man in bushes. Black Eagle wait. When time come, plunge knife. Then jump on head of Hyena. Kill two, but lose scalp."

"Mebbe so go find. Get sister of Gold Buttons Bill. Jump in water. Now here."

"Say save, have save. Now go take sister to Gold Buttons Bill. It is good."

The young girl understood every word of this.

"May the Great Spirit bless you, Black

Eagle!" she said fervently. "I believe all that you have told me. There is truth and honesty in your eyes."

"Yes, take me to my brother, to Gold Buttons Bill, as you call him. You are a true brave, worthy to be a chief; and I'll place an eagle-feather in your fillet myself."

"Spirits of fathers watch and Guide Black Eagle on war-trail. Spirits send Gold Buttons Bill to save Black Eagle. Send Black Eagle to save sister of Gold Buttons Bill."

"It is enough. Talk no good on war-trail."

Away dashed the black steed once more, its iron hoofs clanking over the rocky way.

Marie Montserrat, sinking back upon the arm of her red rescuer, looked up in his face with an expression of gratitude and confidence.

The head of the young Apache was proudly poised, his mien and entire manner were striking, and he appeared as he really was, a red prince of the prairies.

And on, clattering over that rocky and winding trail, the noble black steed sped, as if proud of the double burden it carried—the young red hero of Apacheria, and the golden tressed maiden from up-range.

On they rode to Hard-up, and to Gold Buttons Bill.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE CAVE-EXIT.

THE two pards from up-range had come to the conclusion that the town would be in great danger the coming night.

They knew that the young bandit queen was both vengeful and violent, and with all her father's cunning, and hatred toward an enemy. They did not believe that the Hyenas, led by Nina Noche, would charge boldly into the town; but that, Indian-like, they would steal in, to shoot from safe cover any miner they might be able to catch sight of, and of course fire the shanties.

They were too few in number to cope with the men of Hard-up in a fair fight, or in a reckless charge either; for the citizens were forewarned now, and would not be dumfounded, as on the previous occasion, when their demoralization had been so great that they could not fight with the success which had been theirs.

Had there been any organization and discipline, when the outlaws had charged at the rear entrance of Poison Palace, Bill and Nick did not believe that one of the band would have escaped alive.

They also, from the evidence Bill had obtained, believed that the individual who had cut Professor Pills down, had been a spy in the service of the Hyenas; and that he had known of the service rendered by the doctor to El Negro. They also thought it quite possible that Nina Noche and the band had, by that time, gotten possession of the bandit chief.

They made no attempt to detain such of the miners as wished to go to their claims. There was no probability that there would be any danger before darkness enveloped the earth.

The men who remained in the burg, gamblers and bummers included, were organized into squads by Gold Buttons Bill; and each of these was allowed to elect one of their number as their leader, all subject, however, to Bill's orders. They had ammunition in plenty, and all arms were cleaned and put in order.

Fresh Frank was in a great fever of excitement.

He had little confidence in the miners, on account of their having allowed Nina Noche to run her horse over them, shooting promiscuously, and then bearing away Professor Pills from under their noses.

The landlord did not consider his own cowardly actions at the time, or he would have had little blame for his fellow-townsmen.

Gold Buttons Bill, after doing all he could to put the burg on a war-footing, felt the need of sleep, and stretched himself for that purpose on a gaming table.

When he awoke it was dark, and Poison Palace was nearly full of the rough-garbed men of the mines.

These men looked to Bill to save their town from destruction.

For the young man himself, he had a firm

conviction that the coming night would decide the fate of the Hyenas or of Hard-up. His thoughts, however, were more especially on the possibility that El Negro himself might lead his men.

The reader will recall the fact that, during the latter part of Black Eagle's scalp-dance, the eyes of the bandit chief had opened, but the Apache youth had not been able to discover any expression in them.

The young savage had fully tested this, but El Negro betrayed not the slightest sensibility.

Long after Black Eagle's departure the outlaw leader lay as he had been when the Indian boy last gazed at him—as still and silent as the dead. His nerves were paralyzed, but his brain was active, and he knew all that had been going on around him.

In consequence of this, the mental agony which he endured must have been simply awful.

When the doctor had shut him in the cave, El Negro had sense enough to know that his ally might be observed by some one when leaving, and then all would be up with both of them. Even if Professor Pills had not been seen, there was still another terrible possibility, and that was that he might drink more liquor on his return to the town, and have *delirium tremens*.

Should this occur, he must die there, in that gloomy cavern for want of care.

Again, the professor might get killed, in the attack of the Hyenas, which was sure to be made, and his fate would be the same.

All things considered, the outlaw chief must have been suffering the tortures of the lost.

He was also worried in regard to his daughter, the one being whom he loved. Nina might lead the Hyenas into Hard-up, and fall a victim to her rashness.

Neither she nor the band would know aught of his fate, unless the doctor might get an opportunity of informing them.

Such were the thoughts that occupied El Negro's mind, until the huge stone was turned by Black Eagle and the Indian youth stalked in.

The bandit's lids were closed, and he could not see who had entered. He knew it was not the doctor, for the firm light step was most unlike the heavy, staggering one of Professor Pills.

Then came a terrible thought. It might be one of the men of Hard up!

His fears were soon allayed, upon being given a dose of brandy; and later, when the stranger left the cave

He heard him barricade the entrance.

There was another outlet, but what use was that to a man who was unable to move a finger?

An age seemed to have passed, when again the huge stone revolved.

El Negro knew that the unknown had returned.

Soon he was conscious of more light.

Then he was given more brandy.

The liquor flew like fire through his veins. This feeling was encouraging, for it indicated a recovery of the use of his muscles; but the torture was excruciating nevertheless.

This was followed by the wild scalp-dance which has been described. It betrayed to the bandit leader the character of the unknown.

He was in the power of an Indian, an Apache!

He strove to move, but it was impossible. His lids opened slightly, and remained so.

It ended, however, and the young savage again departed.

But words cannot express the agony of mind and body that the miscreant suffered. He felt that this could not continue, and he retain life. He brought all his will power to bear, to enable him to shriek aloud, or to break the slender thread that bound him to earth.

And he was successful.

A cry came from his lips, the like of which has seldom been uttered on earth, except when some victim at rack or stake has uttered his or her last outcry on earth; life going out with the awful sound.

But the life of El Negro did not go out with it. Just the opposite. The instant he gave utterance to the sound every nerve and

muscle in his body seemed to be twitched asunder, and, as if he had received a powerful electric shock, the bandit chief bounded spasmodically to his feet.

He remained standing but a moment, however. He then fell, as quickly, almost, as he had sprung upward.

But he felt that he was saved—felt that the crisis had passed!

Could he but reach the brandy bottle he might, by drinking freely, banish the torture that racked him.

It called for all the strength he was able to command, yet he accomplished it. He grasped the bottle, his only salvation he felt assured, and, gluing the mouth of it to his lips, he swallowed a copious draught, although the doing so occasioned him great agony.

The liquor seemed like liquid fire to his tongue, mouth, and throat.

Again and again El Negro quaffed the brandy, and at length gave a laugh of relief and triumph, that was wild and horrible. It was followed by a yell of murderous meaning, which made it certain that even then revenge was ruling his brain.

He then perceived that the candle had burned nearly out.

He staggered to the box, and gathered up a handful.

He wanted more light.

Darkness was torture to him.

He lighted one after another.

Soon he had a dozen or more burning. Then he laughed again, but the laugh would have chilled the blood of Black Eagle even, could he have heard it.

He was bent on leaving.

There was food, but he could not eat.

Clutching the brandy bottle that remained uncorked, and catching up a handful of candles, he tottered to a corner of the cavern-chamber, beyond which there was a narrow passage. When the bandit chief had discovered and selected this cavern as a place of hiding, not even informing his daughter of its whereabouts, he had made sure that he would not be in danger of being shut up in it some day like a rat in a trap, to die.

He trusted no man.

Into the passage he staggered, and, after a time that seemed to him an age, he emerged into the bright sunlight. It was now the middle of the afternoon.

El Negro found himself upon a projection of rock.

It was some distance below the point at which Professor Pills and the young Apache had returned through the other passage.

The outlaw stepped forward, suppressing a yell of joy and relief. He parted the foliage of the cedars, and gazed downward. There was an expression of intense hatred, mingled with a thirst for revenge upon his hideous, crime-stamped face, as he fixed his eyes on the two rows of shanties far below, that nestled among the foot-hills—the town of Hard-up.

He changed his gaze.

His bloodshot eyes traveled along the side of the range southward, and but a short distance from his position.

What did he see, that caused such a fearful oath to escape him?

It was the lone pine, to which he had been hanged; and there, below its branches, he could see upon the rock platform an outstretched human form. It was motionless as a corpse, and beside it sat a man in miner's clothes.

A searching look convinced El Negro that the prostrate man was not only bound hand and foot, but that it was none other than the man who had saved his life, Professor Pills.

He had mentally cursed the doctor a thousand and one times for having left him, but now he realized that the delinquent must have been suspected as a spy of the Hyenas, and was under guard and bonds for having cut him down and borne him away.

Some proofs must have been discovered to implicate the professor.

That was plain.

But the men of Hard-up had no idea where he had been secreted.

El Negro felt positive of that.

He resolved that he would rescue the doctor.

It had not been his way to allow gratitude room in his heart, but he wanted the help and the companionship of Professor Pills.

He was bent on saving the man who had

risked life to save him, but it was from a purely selfish motive.

Who that Indian youth could be, and where he had disappeared to, was a mystery to the bandit chief. He wished much to know, for he felt that he must have died, had not the young red-skin given him the brandy on these two or three occasions.

El Negro felt sure that the Apache boy would return to the cave.

He had observed that the red youth had three scalps attached to his belt.

Had these trophies been taken from Hyenas, or from men of Hard-up?

This was another question which the outlaw chief wished much to have answered.

Down the narrow shelf he now stole, proceeding with as much caution as a Comanche, when approaching a band of his enemies as a spy.

At times he braced himself by drinking from the bottle, which was his main dependence.

He headed as direct as was possible for the platform of rock and the lone pine.

Cedars, cacti, granite boulders, and the rough side of the range favored his purpose, and insured him against discovery, did he but practice ordinary caution. And El Negro was as cautious and stealthy as a panther, his heart as brutal, merciless, and bloodthirsty as the most fierce and hungry of the panther tribe.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FULL OF SOUND AND FURY.

The feelings of the Hyenas and their queen, as they realized that the daring and reckless rescue of the young girl by a single Indian, and he a mere youth, had been complete in every way, cannot be described.

The rage of Nina Noche was ungovernable.

She was beside herself, after the pursuit into the shades had proved fruitless, and it was little wonder.

The Apache boy appeared to be alone, and had dashed into the stage road with the evident intent of showing his contempt for the Hyenas; and to show them that a youthful brave could defeat their best laid plans, slay two of their men, and carry away their much-prized captive before their eyes.

It was little short of a miracle, that the horse and its riders were not riddled with bullets, especially as the bandits were so maddened and excited.

After ordering the passengers to be bound, and the stage driven on to the range, Nina, with half the band, sprung upon the fleetest horses, and dashed headlong in pursuit; but, as we know, they overtook not the Apache youth.

Indeed they did not expect to do so, unless some accident should happen to the horse, or it should become unmanageable, and gallop back on the back trail to rejoin those of the band.

The horsemanship of Black Eagle prevented this, and when the bandit queen gave up the chase, she was more like a maniac than a sane woman.

She lingered for the straggling Hyenas to join her, and before this was done the stage, with its guard of mounted bandits—one of them acting as driver—appeared on the plain. The moon had risen, brightening every space between the foot-hills and the creek; although the mountain range shut off its direct rays, and its disk would not be seen for some time along its western base.

The infuriated bandit queen spoke not a word to her masked followers, but led them amid the foot-hills to the entrance of the great gulch, and thence to the arched passage leading to the secret vale.

There, another surprise awaited the outlaws.

The corpse of Juan, the Mexican sentinel, lay at the entrance, scalped; and his comrade was nowhere to be seen.

They knew that the latter had not slain the Greaser, for they were warm friends; and, besides, the body had been scalped.

Nina Noche dashed through the passage, but was met at the inner end by the missing man, who explained the cause of Juan's death.

The Hyenas were truly alarmed.

They were confident that the same Indian youth, who had rescued Gold Buttons Bill's sister, had been at their stronghold.

Then, it must have been that he had overheard the guards speaking of the intended attack on the stage, otherwise he would have known nothing in regard to it.

But then, what could an Indian, and an Apache at that, mean by thus trying to set at naught their plans?

Why did he risk almost certain death, to rescue the girl, unless indeed he was a friend, and a most devoted one, of Gold Buttons Bill?

This, they decided, must be the true state of affairs.

Yes, and the young red-skin had galloped toward Hard up; and would probably at once guide the miners to the secret vale, and then the Hyenas would be exterminated to a man!

Nina realized all this, and made up her mind to act at once, by boarding the lions in their den.

She led the outlaws back to the foot-hills, and there waited for the remainder of the band and the stage.

When these arrived, all continued on, the stage in their midst, until they reached the *motte* of pines, within which El Negro's daughter had met the bandits after her visit to the town.

They were on the south side of the *motte*, and completely hidden from Hard-up.

Then Nina Noche ordered blankets to be bound around the tires of the wheels, and the hoofs of the horses that were attached to the vehicle, as well as those of all the animals of the band.

This was accomplished in an expeditious manner.

Then all the passengers were gagged, they having previously been bound, and cast roughly into the coach.

Nina then dismounted, passed her bridle-reins to one of her men, and stole away toward the town, to reconnoiter; much to the concern and apprehension of the Hyenas, who, however, knew it would be mere waste of breath to remonstrate with her.

The bandit queen wished to make her grand dash for revenge, before the moon illumined the burg.

She reached a near point of observation, from which she had a clear view of the street, and could see the front of every shanty; but not a light was to be seen, not even in Poison Palace.

Utter silence, also, reigned in the town, and not a human being was visible.

She knew not how to account for this.

It seemed as though Hard-up had been deserted.

But Nina Noche knew better.

She knew this was not so.

She felt that what was so peculiar was ominous of danger and death to the Hyenas and herself!

Never had she been so depressed but a thirst for revenge drove this from her mind, and she stole back to the pine *motte*.

Where was the Indian youth?

Where were the men of Hard-up?

Where were the pards from up-range?

Where was Professor Pills?

These questions were uppermost in the mind of El Negro's daughter.

She had determined to hang the doctor for having, as she believed, proved false to her father.

Drunkenness would be no excuse.

He had escaped her once, but he should not a second time.

The pards from up-range should also hang. Yes, and that vile young Indian; he should meet the fate so much dreaded by his people.

Then would the sister of Gold Buttons Bill again be in her power.

Nina Noche allowed not a thought of defeat to enter her mind.

One sweeping glance she gave up the side of the range, and detected, in the rather dim light, the outlines of a human form climbing toward the accursed pine.

She would have given much to know who it was, and his object.

Then an idea occurred to her.

It accounted for the silence in the town.

The men of Hard-up had expected an attack, and would have been fools had they not prepared for it.

They were now, she felt assured, ambushed in the shanties, and behind the boulders and thickets. She would, therefore, lead her

men direct to Poison Palace, and charge into the front entrance; shooting, as the band sped through the building and out the rear door of the hotel.

Either they were thus posted, or they were all secreted in the darkness, in the gaming room, awaiting the dash of herself and band.

These reasonings made her change her plan in regard to the stage.

She had intended to use the vehicle with its bound and gagged passengers, in a manner that would prove to the citizens her power, and her utter contempt for them. She would have it driven up slowly and noiselessly to the hotel, and then have one of her followers blow the stage bugle, and draw all the miners out, and around the newly arrived coach.

Then, it was her intention to have opened a terrific fusilade into the crowd, the Hyenas being in ambush; making sure of Gold Buttons Bill and Nugget Nick as captives, by a charge upon and into the demoralized miners.

Nina began to think this scheme must be changed.

Her new plan was soon decided upon.

She passed around the *motte*, giving much gratification to the Hyenas when she reappeared among them.

Her orders were quickly given.

The gags were removed from the passengers, after they had solemnly sworn to make no outcry until the stage should stop, opposite Poison Palace.

Then a bandit was directed to take the bit of each of the leaders, and slowly guide them to the foot of the street. They were, then, to be allowed to continue without guidance.

At once this was done.

On went the stage, making but slight creaking. Soon the rougher ground was passed over, and the horses went at a walk up the street. The bandits knew that the team would halt at the hotel from habit.

The town was still in silence.

The silvery moon had begun to peep above the peaks.

Not the faintest zephyr stirred the air.

The stage reached the front of Poison Palace, and the horses halted.

At that moment, the merry blast of the stage bugle broke the impressive stillness.

This sound was followed close, by the yells and cries of the torturingly-bound passengers in the Concord coach.

CHAPTER XXXII.

TOTALLY UNEXPECTED.

GOLD BUTTONS BILL was clear-headed and intelligent, far above all in the burg, and with great detective and strategic qualities. He was brave as a lion, and skillful in the use of every weapon that was necessary on the border.

In fact, he was one born to command. His very presence caused him to be recognized as a leader.

A bounteous supper had been prepared in the hotel. This was gotten up as a free treat by Fresh Frank. It had been, however, with a particular object; and that was, to draw the miners from their claims in the gulch to the town, at an earlier hour than they would think of without some such inducement.

A messenger was dispatched to the "new find," an hour before the time fixed, with the landlord's order that all start immediately, on pain of forfeiting their share in the rich repast. There was to be no second table, and it seemed probable that there would be little left for it, if there was.

The consequence was, that the absentees made a wild stampede from the gulch to the town, where a free "set 'em up" greeted them on their arrival. Fresh Frank was evidently disposed to do nothing by halves. In this, however, he was by no means disinterested.

He had feared a dash from the Hyenas before the miners should return, but his cunning had drawn them back to town.

The sun was nearing the horizon when the feast broke up, and preparations were commenced for the night's work. Gold Buttons decided upon stationing four parties, of ten men each, at different points, one party between Poison Palace and the base of the range, another to the south, another to the

southeast, and the remaining one directly east from the town.

Each of them was fully two hundred yards distant from the street.

Then Gold Buttons Bill instructed them in the way of signals, as the situation might call for.

Fresh Frank became quite elated. His fears nearly all vanished, before the confident and commanding manner of Gold Buttons; especially when he heard the proposed line of defense.

"Dang my dyspeptic disperish!" Nugget Nick had exclaimed, after everything had been arranged for the night, "ef ther hell-yuns o' Hyeners gits away with we-'uns, an' burns the burg, I'll own that they orter run ther range, an' that Nina Noche air a heap sight more of a tiger-cat than her dad!"

Neither Gold Buttons Bill nor Nick had thought it prudent to inform the men of Hard-up that they had strong proof that the bandit chief was yet alive. The landlord feared to divulge what had been told him, and all three felt some sympathy for Professor Pills, on account of what the poor wretch must have suffered.

They knew that the miners would hang the doctor at once, did they know of the proofs against him, and they thought—that is, the two pards did—that if the poor incendiary were removed from evil associates, sobered up, and started afresh, he might yet become a useful member of society.

His experience in Hard-up had certainly been a rough one, and the two men had now a hold upon him which might go far toward making him turn over a new leaf.

As darkness fell upon the earth, Gold Buttons Bill stationed the parties of miners, as he had arranged, having fifteen exclusive of Nick and Frank remaining under his own especial command. These he posted at Poison Palace, forming a breastwork at the rear end of the large apartment, with chairs and tables, over which were spread blankets, fifteen in thickness, all along the barricades.

Through this thick mass it was impossible for bullets to penetrate.

This done, the miners were stationed with loaded weapons behind it.

Bill then ordered the landlord to light all his lamps, and hang them around the bar-room walls. This caused the room to be brilliantly illuminated, but the barricade and its defenders were in darkness; or, at least, in such dim light that those who might enter the front door, where all was in such a glare, would be unable to penetrate the gloom beyond.

All being now ready, our friends took their positions, Fresh Frank forgetting not to take with him a demijohn of whisky and glasses.

Long they waited, until the moon in the east brightened up the west of the range, although the orb of night showed not her bright and smiling face to those who were close at the mountain's base. The time passed tediously, but Frank now and then treated, and those who chose to do so indulged in their pipes.

The defenders, who were within the hotel, depended upon the parties outside to signal the approach of the Hyenas. This was to be done by a series of coyote yelps, given by a noted imitator of those beasts.

The ambushed men depended more upon their sense of hearing than of sight.

At length, when all had become more than impatient, there sounded in the ears of even the men within the hotel, the clatter of hoofs upon the stony stage trail.

These sounds came fast, and betrayed to the "citz" that but one horse was speeding toward Hard-up; also, that the animal was controlled by some one. Not only so, but it was evident that the beast had traveled fast and far, but had a goodly weight in the saddle.

Of course none apprehended danger from such a source.

But a great surprise awaited them.

The sight which they soon beheld was a most unexpected and undreamed-of one.

It was neither more nor less than the identical black steed of El Negro, upon which Nina Noche had charged into Poison Palace!

But the appearance of the horse was as nothing compared with what it carried.

In the saddle sat a paint-daubed Apache youth, supporting on his left arm a fair young girl, who seemed not in the least affrighted.

Straight toward the lighted front entrance of the hostelry went the black steed. The animal had been there before, and it needed little or no guidance.

The ambushed miners sprung from their coverts, in amazement.

There had been no signal arranged for such an arrival as this.

They might have recovered sufficiently from their astonishment to shoot the Apache, had not the maiden been with him; and yet, they could not have done so, for the dullest-minded among them could not fail to see that the Indian boy had no bad intent. He was heading directly for Poison Palace, and seemed devoid of fear, or even concern.

Black Eagle gave the horse free rein, and it shot into the door.

High the animal tossed its head, arching its neck, and casting flecks of snowy foam upon the floor. Opposite the bar it halted.

It was a most impressive picture.

But not a minute passed, in the unbroken silence that had ruled the hotel after this singular advent.

Had the miners turned their eyes upon the up-range pards, they would have seen them start, as if electrified.

Gold Buttons Bill staggered to his feet.

He seemed to be choking.

He strove to give vent to his emotions, but in vain.

Was he going mad?

It would almost seem so.

He had been, but a moment before, thinking of that sister, far up the range in Boulderburg, and of that Indian youth also; and, lo! here they both were, before him!

But the young man's brain was too well balanced to remain long undecided between what was real and what was unreal.

"Mariel!" he exclaimed; "Mariel Montserrat, my sister, what does this mean?"

He sprung over the barricade, followed by Nick.

"It is really you, then, Marie?"

"Oh! Will, Will! Thank God!"

A glad light was in the eyes of Black Eagle. He lifted the maiden from the saddle, and placed her in her brother's arms.

The presence of that young girl in such a place, was of course something to be explained.

There had been but one female in the burg since Hard-up had been "slapped up," and that had been the daughter of El Negro.

But this one was a striking contrast to the bandit queen.

Not only that but she was the sister of Gold Buttons Bill, the "Boss of the Burg."

But, how came she in company with the Apache youth, and the horse of the outlaw chief?

The miners had to wait patiently for an answer to this.

The joy which the arrival occasioned had to find vent in some way, and it did in cheers that almost flared out the lights, and caused the black steed to rear and plunge in fright.

The ambushed citizens had waited for a signal from Bill, to call them to Poison Palace. They were wild with curiosity to know about the strange arrivals, but no summons greeted their eager ears.

When the rousing cheers burst forth, however, from the door of the hotel, human nature could stand no more; and, with answering yells, the four parties of miners rushed from their several stations, at headlong speed, toward Poison Palace.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

STILL THEY COME.

WITH great skill, Black Eagle kept the horse whirling about, until the animal had gotten over its fright occasioned by the cheers of the men of Hard-up.

Then the parties from outside, forty in number, rushed into the room, the leaders halting a few paces from the door, in increased astonishment, when they beheld the beautiful maiden, who was standing by the side of Gold Buttons Bill. Those who followed pressed against them, and so on, until they stood, packed as closely together as sardines.

Thus they remained, in open-mouthed wonder, gazing alternately on the Apache boy, the black horse, the maiden, and Gold Buttons Bill. Then they looked inquiringly into the faces of their fellow-townspeople, across the sacred circle.

All this took up but a few moments.

Marie Montserrat recovered her composure, and, pointing at the Indian boy, said, in a voice of deep feeling:

"There, upon the black horse of Nina Noche, the Queen of the Hyenas, sits a red youth with a white heart!

"That is Black Eagle, who, on his first lone war-path, to gain the honors and trophies that would give him the right to wear an eagle-feather in his fillet, discovered my brother Will, high up the range, above this town of yours.

"He stole up the steep, to kill and scalp him. He has been honest enough to confess this to me. But Nugget Nick and Will met on the rocky shelf. You two halted together, for a lunch, and this young Apache resolved not to miss the chance of securing one or both your scalps.

"He stole down the steep, but a huge cinnamon bear sprung upon him, and they both rolled down to the level of the mountain cove in which you were camped. He freed himself from the bear, thrust his lance in the beast, but was driven to the wall.

"There was no retreat, and he braced himself against the rock, with lance presented, only regretting that he had no daring deeds to chant of in his death-song. You, my brother, and Nick rushed to his aid, and slew the bear.

"Black Eagle was, by that time, unconscious. When he recovered, he saw the two white men binding up his wounds, but he remained motionless. When you left him for a few moments, he crawled away up the side of the mountain, for the tongue of his people had no words in which he could speak his gratitude.

"But he resolved to prove it, notwithstanding, and nobly he has done it.

"You both started down the mountain, and two men shot at you, but without effect. They were Hyenas, for they had black masks in their pockets.

"Black Eagle, although weak and wounded, killed one, and wounded the other fatally, when he was, later on, sending fire-signals, probably to the band down the range. He then hovered around near the town, and learned much which he has not cared to tell me.

"In connection with my rescue, he has explained that, while spying upon the Hyenas, he learned the names of the men who saved him from the bear, as well as those of the bandit queen and her father. He also learned that a spy of El Negro had ascertained, when I was in San Diego, who I was, and what my object was in coming down the range.

"This spy reported to Nina Noche, who resolved to 'hold up' the stage on which I was coming, and capture me, in revenge for the lynching of her father.

"Black Eagle resolved to prove his gratitude to Will, by preventing my capture. He went on foot and alone to the creek, after witnessing the departure of the Hyenas for that point.

"He secured the black horse, climbed a tree over the ford, and there crouched, over the heads of a score of masked outlaws. The coach was halted in the stream, two mounted bandits dashing into it, one on each side. Nina Noche stood on the east bank, directing matters.

"Black Eagle, in some way, lighted upon the two Hyenas, and both fell corpses into the stream, before the others could recover from their surprise. He then seized me, and dived with me beneath the waters.

"In this way I escaped, reaching the opposite bank in an unconscious state, when this brave youth sprung with me on the back of Nina's noble steed. They pursued, but could not overtake us."

Marie had spoken in English, so the young Apache was not embarrassed by her words.

Gold Buttons Bill extended his hand to the youthful brave, as he said:

"Black Eagle, the Great Spirit brought us together, on the mountain, for our mutual good and benefit.

"You have won my eternal gratitude by your daring rescue of my sister, who is all I have left to me in this world. Let us bury the hate of our people, and henceforth banish all enmity from our hearts.

"You have shown yourself far above your

race, in crushing down the feelings that have, from childhood, been instilled into your mind against the pale-faces. I cannot thank you as I would, for the services you have done me. They repay, a hundred times, the little that I and my pard did for you.

"But you have seen and heard more on the mountains than you wished to tell my sister. Perhaps you know something that will be of benefit to us in regard to the bad white men, who dare not, like true warriors, meet their enemies in fair fight.

"They have threatened to burn our town to-night. The war-path is open, and so are our ears, if Black Eagle wishes to speak."

Gold Buttons had been informed by Marie that she had conversed with the Apache youth in Spanish. He was not surprised at this, as many among his people have learned to speak that language quite well from Mexican captives.

While Gold Buttons Bill and his sister had been speaking, the crowd of miners remained silent. They listened eagerly to every word that was uttered, all being filled with admiration for Black Eagle. Indeed, had not the deeds of daring performed by him been told them by Marie, they could hardly have given an Apache credit for the motive that had called them forth.

The young Indian slid down from the horse.

He did not think it showed proper respect to remain mounted, thus proving that he had a natural politeness, which had come to him by instinct, from the Mexican blood that flowed in his veins.

With one hand clasped by Marie, and the other by Bill, he stood before the men of Hard-up. His head was erect, and his keen black eyes fixed, first in the eyes of one, and then of another, in some bewilderment.

His conviction was, that there were some disclosures which he ought not to make in public.

He had seen both of his white friends caring for the madman at the lone pine, and he did not think it prudent to tell that he had witnessed the same man cut down El Negro, and secrete him in a cave, except to the Up-Range Pards alone.

Still, he must tell them that the outlaw chief was alive, and that he himself knew the location of the Hyenas' stronghold.

The Apache youth withdrew his bronzed hands from the clasp of Bill and Marie, and then, jerking the scalps from his belt cried out:

"Look! Black Eagle kill so many bad white men. Could kill more, but have heap to do. Keep eyes open. No sleep. Want see what Hyena do. Hard-up men hang bad white chief, then go away. Then pard of bad chief come, cut lariat. Carry El Negro to cave on mountain.

"Black Eagle go to cave. El Negro heap sick. Black Eagle shut him in cave. He there now. Then Black Eagle go find cave of bad white men.

"Live there"—pointing up the range—"horse go quick. Valley in mountains. Good grass. Good water. Black Eagle lead white brothers to Hyena cave when sun come.

"Lose two scalps on creek. Must go, get. Have eagle-feather when go back to village. It is good.

"Look, Gold Buttons,"—pointing to the horse—"Black Eagle steal horse of El Negro. Good horse. Run like deer. White brother take horse. Ride in land where cold winds blow."

As he spoke, the Apache youth passed the bridle reins to Bill.

But the young man would not receive them. He held up his hand, in a negative gesture, at the same time saying:

"Oh, no! The horse of the bandit chief is yours, Black Eagle, by right of conquest. Ride him back to your village when you leave us, if return you must."

The young Indian was delighted. His eyes glittered, as he glanced at the noble steed.

The miners were astounded, to learn that the outlaw captain still lived. They blamed themselves for their hurry in leaving him, but determined to make sure work the next time.

Gold Buttons Bill gave a signal for silence and attention.

He then addressed the crowd.

"Men of Hard-up, return to your former stations! More than ever may we now expect a visit from the infuriated Hyenas, and their queen, who, having been foiled by this brave and daring young Apache in capturing my sister, will be more desperate in their attack upon us.

"We intend, however, to be before them in any strategy they may contrive.

"To your posts, men! And we, of Poison Palace, can be depended upon when the time comes."

A murmur of applause was heard.

Then the forty miners separated into parties of ten, and proceeded to their former coverts in the thickets.

Marie was furnished with food, and Black Eagle also, but the latter refused to eat when an enemy was expected.

The young girl was very weary and sleepy, and soon endeavored to get some rest; but her nerves were in too excited a state, and she lay with open eyes, expecting every moment the crack of rifles and revolvers.

Gold Buttons Bill then changed his mind with reference to lighting up the bar. He stationed his men near the front entrance, and extinguished all the lights; giving his orders that, should the Hyenas make a dash, a volley must be fired into them.

Then a rush was to be made by his men, to and behind the barricade.

All were once more in readiness to repel the expected invaders.

Silence again fell upon the town of Hard-up.

Not a living object, human or brute, was visible within its limits.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FOILING THE FOE.

MATTERS were approaching a crisis.

Gold Buttons Bill felt equal, however, to the occasion.

He understood the object of the Hyenas in sending the stage, in the way they did, to Poison Palace; the passengers yelling to be set free. The outlaws believed the men of Hard-up to be in the hotel, and waiting for them to make a dash into the building. They had hit upon this scheme of sending instead the tortured passengers, whose cries would draw out the miners.

Then, in the confusion, the bandits could make a charge, killing and capturing; and, afterward, burn the town.

Having thus decided, Bill did not propose to be caught in a trap. He therefore took steps to balk the bandits in their first move.

As the coach rolled in, he called out:

"Cut those passengers free, pard Nick!"

"All hunk, Bill!" was the response.

Soon the outcries of the travelers ceased.

The Hyenas had been foiled.

Gold Buttons Bill had taken the first trick in the game.

Would he sweep the board?

That was the momentous question now.

Great was the fury of Nina Noche.

The bandit queen was in a quandary.

What was she to do next?

Her men were impatient, and she knew she could not restrain them for any length of time. She gave the only order that would give her time to consider and plan.

"Follow me, Hyenas! We'll circle Poison Palace. The cowards are hiding in the gambling end of the building, to give us hot lead if we charge in at the front."

She lashed her horse, and the animal bounded forward, the masked bandits following.

Not one was there who was not a crack shot.

But, equally skilled in the use of their weapons, were the men of Hard up.

Down between the two southernmost shanties, dashed the Hyenas, in a compact mass.

The ten ambushed miners made ready to pour in a death volley without waiting for the signal from Gold Buttons Bill; for the outlaws were galloping straight toward them. But Nina Noche swerved, in a circling course, toward the rear entrance of the hotel. The horde swept past the crouching citizens, with the rushing sound of a "norther."

A minute more, and the pistol of the bandit queen was leveled at the rear door of

Poison Palace, and every weapon in the band went up at once.

"Fire!"

El Negro's daughter fairly shrieked the word of command.

The pine boards were splintered.

Then there was silence.

The outlaws listened, but there was no returning shot. Not a yell, nor a groan, sounded from Poison Palace.

This state of affairs had been totally unexpected by Nina and her band.

Something must be done, and she now ordered a charge to recapture the passengers, if the latter were still in the coach. Just as the Hyenas reached the north end of the street, the moon arose.

The outlaws had become more prudent and less reckless since entering Hard-up, and the strange silence and inaction of the town and its denizens was gloomily and discouragingly impressive.

At length Nina Noche yelled:

"Follow me! We'll sweep through the street. A thousand dollars in gold for either one of the Up-Range Pards alive, or for that traitor, Professor Pills!"

A fierce cry burst from the bandits, as all urged their horses down the street, to pass the hotel in its front, not ten feet from its main entrance.

Their revolvers were leveled, as at the charge past the rear of the building, and again, as the masked horde swept up in a line with the large open doorway, the same command shot from the lips of the outlaw queen:

"Fire!"

There was the same result.

Not a sound answered them.

Gold Buttons had ordered all hands to the rear behind the barricade as soon as he discovered the Hyenas at the north end of the street, all his men having been, fortunately, at the front when the outlaws fired into the rear.

Many of the bullets flew the length of the room, but they struck harmlessly against the blanketed barricade.

The disgusted Hyenas drew rein.

Nina Noche was nearly insane with fury.

This utter repudiation of their presence was exasperating in the extreme.

Nina gave a new order.

"Dismount, Four Jacks, and set fire to that first shanty! We'll burn the cowardly dogs out of their kennels!"

The bandit designated slipped from his saddle and ran to obey the order.

Then a peculiar whistle sounded from Poison Palace, and, as the sound died away, the sharp crack of a rifle broke on the night air.

Four Jacks, who was igniting some dry grass at the corner of the shanty, bounded to his feet, with a yell. He then threw up his arms, and fell back, silent and motionless forever!

A whoop of fury came from the masked band, who leveled directly at the thicket.

Before they could again press the triggers, ten deadly tubes sent a hail of lead into their midst. A dozen Hyenas fell from their steeds to the earth, while three others groaned and swayed in their saddles.

"Charge the ambush!" shouted the daughter of El Negro. "Shoot every man down!"

Only ten of her men were able to obey the order of the queen.

These sped, headlong, to and through the thicket which had served as a covert for an equal number of the men from Hard-up; but not a human being could they find.

A yell from the town, then drew their attention; and, upon gazing toward the street, they beheld the Up-Range Pards, Gold Buttons Bill and Nugget Nick, with the daring Black Eagle, and some fifteen miners; while, at the door of the shanty beyond the hotel, stood Marie Montserrat!

A tableau better calculated to madden Nina Noche could not have been arranged.

It was terribly exasperating to the surviving Hyenas as well, and made their situation seem desperate and almost hopeless, especially after the losses they had met with.

Then, out from the thickets, on the three sides, at a shrill whistle from Gold Buttons Bill, sprung the ambushed miners, with weapons leveled.

Nina, and the remaining half-score of Hyenas, gazed at them, appalled.

They felt as if staring death in the face. It was not only desperate, but humiliating. The pards from up-range showed no weapons. They simply stood, with folded arms, gazing in seeming contempt at those whom they had corralled. It was all that remained of the murderous band of El Negro—the Hyenas of Hard-up, but no longer able to run the town—placed in a position that would prevent them from carrying out the oaths they had sworn over the open grave of their chief!

But those oaths were of little consequence, when their own lives trembled in the balance.

The full, round, silvery moon, clear of the serrated horizon of peaks, shone placidly down upon the scene. It was however soon to change in such a manner, as to still further dumfound the outlaws, and astonish the men at Hard-up as well.

All were standing, as we have described, when a horrid yell shot out on the night air, and echoed amid clefts and gorges, far up the side of the rocky range.

This drew the eyes of all to a point midway between Poison Palace and the south end of the street—a point one coming direct to the town from the lone pine would be sure to strike.

Out from between two shanties, in a wavering and staggering gait, came Professor Pills. He held the slack of a rope, on the other end of which was a noose, and that noose inclosed the neck of El Negro, the Scourge of the Soledad Range!

The arms of the bandit chief were bound fast behind him, and his face was ghastly as that of a corpse. The face of the doctor was bloated and purplish, and his eyes blazed with a semi-insane light.

El Negro still lived, as the pards had been for some time satisfied, but it mystified them to see him thus, a prisoner in the hands of the very man who had frustrated their attempts to rid the earth of such a monster.

How had the outlaw captain escaped from the cave?

And what had brought about the revulsion of feeling toward him that had caused his tool and confederate thus to capture him, place a rope around his neck, and drag him to the town, with the evident purpose of delivering the miscreant up to justice?

As for the uninitiated miners, the Hyenas, and Nina Noche, they all gazed in speechless wonder; some of them actually trembling in superstitious horror, believing that the grave had given up its dead.

There could be no mistaking the man.

His head, like that of his captor, was devoid of covering of any kind, and the moonlight revealed plainly to the gazers the familiar features which they had believed to be shut out of sight forever!

CHAPTER XXXV.

BLACK EAGLE WEARS THE FEATHER AT LAST.

THE brain of Nina Noche was busy.

Her thoughts flew like wild-fire.

She recalled the expected service of Professor Pills, which she had believed him to have neglected. She had wronged him in that. He must now be moved by an insane whim, born of intoxicating dinks.

She had found the doctor drunk in Poison Palace, but he could have gotten into that state after performing the service for which he had been stationed in Hard-up. Doubtless the excitement had caused him to drink even more deeply than usual.

The body, they had buried in the secret vale, must be that of one of the band, and had been thrown down the steep rocks by the doctor purposely; the clothes which her father had worn had been put upon it, and the features were not recognizable.

Professor Pills had done this to deceive the men of Hard-up, and had hidden her father.

In short, he had done his duty. He had then gotten as drunk as a lord. She had used him roughly, and he had then stolen away from her. In his intoxicated condition, he had neglected to attend to his charge, and El Negro had crawled from his hiding-place, found the doctor, and perhaps tried to kill him for not having attended to his wants.

Professor Pills had overpowered his employer, and, in his insane rage at being thus

repaid for the dangerous service he had performed, had placed a rope around her father's neck, and was delivering him up to death.

All this occurred to Nina Noche, almost on the instant, and she yelled:

"Charge to the rescue, Hyenas of Hard-up!"

Without waiting to see whether her men followed, up the street she dashed to the south end of the same. The ten outlaws galloped headlong after, their weapons gripped tight, and their teeth set.

They rode, as they well knew, to death; but it was to escape a worse death—that of the noose.

A series of rapid orders were given by Gold Buttons Bill, as he saw Nina make the start to rescue her father.

Black Eagle darted to the side of the sable steed he had stolen at the creek—the horse of the bandit chief—it being secured near Poison Palace; and, springing into the saddle, urged the animal into the street.

Nugget Nick and a half-dozen miners rushed to meet the professor and his prisoner. They clutched the pair, and carried them into the hotel.

At a gesture from her brother, Marie Montserrat stepped inside the shanty, and closed the door.

The miners, led by Gold Buttons Bill, formed in line across the street, in front of Poison Palace, into which dashed Fresh Frank, and crawled under his bar, trembling from head to foot.

The four parties of citizens stationed themselves to intercept the bandits at the south end of the street, and thus Nina and her ten desperate followers were worse corralled than before. They had ridden right into a trap, the bait of which had been furnished by Professor Pills.

But there was no slackening of speed.

On they thundered.

Nina Noche seemed unconscious of all else, except that she had seen her father borne into the hotel.

She kept her eyes fixed upon the door, her steed seeming to fly toward it.

"Ready, men!" yelled Gold Buttons Bill. "Get in your work before they shoot!"

The men of Hard-up fired, but not more than an instant before the Hyenas.

The sequel was terrific!

When the smoke cleared, ten masked men were seen lying in the dust of the street, nearly all silent and still.

Ten paces from them lay six miners.

Between these and the entrance to Poison Palace was a strange scene, which calls for explanation.

Gold Buttons Bill had been at the right of the line, directing his men.

Meanwhile the bandit's daughter paid no attention to her followers, but headed toward the open door of the hotel. She thought only of her father.

Black Eagle, seeing her object, urged the black steed forward, barring her way.

Professor Pills, left alone with his captive, had arisen from the floor, and staggered to the bar, to pour down some of the liquor he so much craved.

El Negro, finding himself no longer watched, cast off the rope from his neck, and, crawling hastily to the rear, succeeded in opening the door.

But, to return to Nina Noche.

The sight of her father's favorite horse, bestrode by the Apache youth, who had thwarted her plan of revenge, rendered her a veritable fury.

She also saw Gold Buttons Bill.

The proud Apache boy scorned to draw weapon upon a squaw. His intention was to jerk Nina from the saddle by clutching her long hair. But he knew not the skill, the nerve and fury, he was to meet.

Quick as lightning, the revolver of the desperate girl flashed fire, and both Black Eagle and Gold Buttons Bill fell to the earth!

Hardly had the young brave fallen from his saddle, than Nina Noche was in the same. She had possession of her father's magnificent horse once more.

Into the hotel she dashed, a cry of relief came from her lips, for she saw her father at the open door in the rear.

He had evaded his enemies.

He was escaping!

"Father! Father!" she shrieked. "It is

I—your Nina! I have come to save you. We are the last of the Hyenas!

"Come! We defy the Up-Range Pards. We defy the men of Hard-up. We defy death!"

El Negro had paused. He saw his noble black steed, and Nina, his Nina. What more could he wish, after his recent experiences?

Nothing.

The next moment, the two were in the saddle, and were speeding like the wind, down the range.

Professor Pills actually spilled the glass of whisky which he had poured out, but he quickly helped himself to another, secured a bottle, and, taking the revolver of Fresh Frank from under the bar, he ran out the rear door in pursuit of El Negro.

His one fear was, that the men of Hard-up would hang him for allowing the bandit chief to escape.

In front of Poison Palace, there was an affecting scene.

Marie Montserrat had rushed wildly out, where her brother had fallen; but the wound of Gold Buttons was not a serious one. He was soon himself again, but was greatly saddened when he realized all that had occurred.

A circle had gathered around a prostrate form.

It was that of Black Eagle, the Apache youth, who was supported by Nugget Nick, in a sitting posture. His white friends were about to witness his death, to which he had come through his devotion to them.

The bullet of Nina, the Nemesis, had passed entirely through his breast.

Black Eagle was sinking fast.

Naught but pride and triumph, however, could be detected upon his painted face, and in his fast-glazing eyes.

He clutched the three scalps, the trophies of his prowess, on his first and last lone war-trail, as he chanted his death-song.

Marie Montserrat held one hand of the Indian boy, as the tears coursed down her checks.

Suddenly an idea occurred to her brother. He whispered to Nugget Nick, who hastened to the stables, and procured from Bill's saddle-bags some black eagle-feathers of rare beauty and glossy as silk. Selecting the finest, he returned hastily, and handed it to his pard.

Gold Buttons held up the feather before the face of the Apache youth, and then gave it to Marie to place in his fillet.

Exultation became more deeply expressed than ever upon the red youth's face, when he perceived what his white friends intended by it.

He bowed his head.

Marie Montserrat kissed the feather and placed it in the fillet of the young brave.

Then he seemed to gather all the strength he was master of, and struggled to his feet, assisted by the pards from up-range. Freeing himself from them, he stood erect, his plume-crowned head proudly poised. His eyes were fixed upon the sky, but they were filming.

Thus he stood for a moment.

Then came from his throat, the wild war-cry of his people.

His proud head fell upon his breast.

His form trembled, and the Indian boy fell back into the arms of his white brothers, a corpse!

Black Eagle had won the right to wear an eagle-feather in his fillet, but it was the only one he ever would win. His last war-whoop had sounded in the ears of none but pale-faces.

"May you rest in peace, Black Eagle! You were a better and a truer man than thousands who have been reared in civilization."

It was thus that William Montserrat spoke the obituary of the Apache boy.

Little more remains to be told.

The dead miners and bandits were buried in separate places, beneath whispering pines; while the remains of Black Eagle were laid to rest in a cavity of a rock, up the side of the range.

A searching party was sent out to look after El Negro and Nina Noche; and, in the secret val—, beside a smoldering camp fire, the daughter of the bandit chief was found, badly wounded; while, clutched in each

other's arms, and in the grip of death—their bowies still in their hands—were El Negro and Professor Pills.

The doctor had taken his last drink at Poison Palace.

The Scourge of the Soledad had made his last dash upon his sable steed, to run a town, or "hold up a hearse."

The Up-Range Pards returned with Marie to Bowlderburg, much to the regret of the men of Hard-up. The burg grew to be a flourishing town, the new "find" in the gulch proving to be a rich one; and, in the course of a year from the time of which we write, there were many respectable dwellings, and a dozen or more streets instead of the two straggling lines of shanties.

Women and children had ceased to be curiosities in Hard-up, when Marie Montserrat was again there, with her brother William and Nugget Nick; the former having purchased a rich quartz mine in the town, and having been assured that the citizens would unanimously elect him mayor of the Mountain City.

And this proved to be the case.

All were prosperous and happy, and our three friends often climbed the range, and sat beneath the lone pine, or by the side of Black Eagle's rocky tomb, there to converse pleasantly of the past, hopefully of the future, and a little sadly now and then of the "might have been."

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